THE ABU DHABI BREAKTHROUGH

ANATOMY OF THE NSE SCANDAL

PANKAJ MISHRA ON HIS NEW NOVEL

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Cover by Saurabh Singh

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LETTER OF THE WEEK

The hijab row in Karnataka seems like a man-made issue only to create unrest in society by polarising communities ('Shah Bano 2.0', February 28, 2022). Political parties are supporting the cause with an eye to votes, and this will have dangerous ramifications. In a landmark ruling in 1985, the Supreme Court had ordered maintenance to petitioner Shah Bano by her husband under the Code of Criminal Procedure. However, the Congress government had indulged in appeasement politics by overturning the Supreme Court's ruling, and passing a new law in Parliament that said a husband needed to provide maintenance to his wife only during *iddat*—the waiting period a woman must observe after the death of her husband or her divorce before she can marry another man—and if the woman could not support herself or her children, the Waqf Board had to provide for her and her children. Ultimately, the unsuccessful attempts led to Shah Bano withdrawing her case. Congress was severely criticised for depriving Shah Bano of her alimony. Hopefully, events will take a different turn this time.

KR Srinivasan

OPEN
THE HIJAB QUESTION
IS IT SHAH BANO 2.0?

BATTLEGROUND UP

The elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP) will be an interesting contest with Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and the Bharatiya Janata Party facing challenges from the Samajwadi Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal tie-up ('The Peace Dividend', February 21, 2022). Adityanath seems popular but price rise and unemployment are important issues. UP is more polarised than ever, and this might empower BJP, which may win but with a slimmer margin than in 2017.

MY Shariff

LEGACY OF A TITAN

The late Rahul Bajaj was a visionary businessman who made "Bajaj" a household name with products like the Chetak ('Scooter Man', February 28, 2022). Bajaj was also known for his no-holds-barred talks. He never minced his words while criticising the ruling dispensation. More recently, he opposed demonetising currency notes and the first lockdown. Although Bajaj came from an illustrious and privileged family, he forged his own unforgettable legacy.

Bal Govind

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By S PRASANNARAJAN

Putin's Imperium of the Mind

VLADIMIR PUTIN BEGAN his invasion of Ukraine when the United States and a less-than-cohesive Europe talked about the consequences, and imposed sanctions that were not meant to hurt him so badly. Such posturing from the pretenders of the unipolar world he despised was inconsequential, for, like any other dictator who was set on the path to the restoration of national glory, he sought his allies elsewhere, not just in the paranoia of a leader denied the respect he deserves from the masters of the so-called free world but in the imagined history of humiliations. In that history, constantly altered to fit his oversized sense of hurt, an independent Ukraine, second only to Russia in the imperial imagination that still lingers in the living remains of the USSR, is a mistake—and its legitimacy as a sovereign state incompatible with the Greater Russia that soars in his mind. History has given him bad geography, and, from the perspective of the chosen one, an invasion is the inevitability of duty.

It's this inflated national reconstructor that looms over a world that Putin has taken for granted—a world that has not been prepared for the next big war. A world that was falling into the illusion that the liberal substructure of the post-Cold War World would withstand the madness of a few bad guys seeking the eternity of power in places like Moscow and Beijing. Putin was the biggest baddy of them all, and who, for the last twenty years, was building the Cult of the Reclaimer, the most audacious mythmaking project in post-Soviet Russia, its raw material drawn from the wounded Slavic soul and imperial nostalgia. He had to nurture the imperium of the mind because, around him, the hostility of freedom as defined by the architects of the false unipolar world was making him an outcast, keeping him out of the Western club. The frustration of the isolated dictator came out with defiant clarity in his famous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference: "What's a unipolar world? However one might embellish the term, at the end of the day it refers to one type of situation, namely one centre of authority, one centre of force, one centre of decision-making. It's a world in which there is one master, one sovereign…This is pernicious not only for all those within this system, but also for the sovereign itself because it destroys itself from within."

This defiance—and the rejection of the America-led triumphalism of the post-Cold War World—comes from a man for whom the history the liberal world claims to have won with the end of World War II, and later with the fall of the Berlin Wall, is a lie. Even as he made every institution of post-Soviet Russia an instrument to serve his absolute power, and silenced dissent with nerve gas, he elevated his domestic despotism to the level of nationalist messianism, his personal power grab as a historical correction. The burst of democracy around him, in the near abroad, in the liberated republics of the erstwhile Soviet Union, frightened him, and their clamour for joining NATO (the Baltic republics are already members), an organisation that has rejected his own application for membership, deepened his hurt. The outright 'Westernisation' of Ukraine, which desperately seeks NATO membership, was a direct assault on his Great Russia project. Crimea 2014 was the warning; today a West without the moral idealism to match his manic determination could only be a blustering bystander as the war on Ukraine intensifies.

He has been preparing for this war since the Maidan revolution that liberated Ukraine from Russia's patronage in 2014. "We have lived together for centuries. Together we triumphed in the most horrible of wars. And we will continue to live together. And to those who want to divide us, I can only say one thing: the day will never come," he had written in 2012. A Ukraine breaking away from his idea of collective destiny was a subversion of his grand vision of a Eurasia—and he dreaded the day. When the day of division came,

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

There could not have been a better redeemer than Putin, a witness and a participant in Russia's rise and decline. The man who has sent troops to Ukraine is the redeemer rearmed, daring the democratic usurper in Kyiv and the doddering lord of the free world in Washington. He dares to dare because history is on his side, history as written by the last Russian standing in the make-believe of an imperium

there was virtually no one to stop him, at home or abroad. The simulated Russianness, a perfect alibi for a dictator who understands the uses of the Nation Outcast in the time of international adversity, did him no harm at home. His open defiance of international systems showed how much better he understood the weaknesses of his adversaries. With endorsement from the fellow dictator of eternity in Beijing, he has come to realise that borders have suddenly become too fragile to withstand the force of the imperial project.

The imperialist in his pursuit is guided by his spiritual guru, Ivan Ilyin, an apostle of Christian fascism, and, in the words of the American historian Timothy Snyder, "a guide on the darkening road to unfreedom", and for whom, "the principle of democracy is the irresponsible human atom." In his argument, as Snyder explains in his book on Russia, Europe and America, *The Road to Unfreedom*, the institution of redeemer alone could save Russia from democracy: "The redeemer would be responsible for all executive, legislative, and judiciary functions, and command the armed forces. Russia would be a centralised state as the fascist regimes of the 1930s had been. That was one party so many. Russia should be a zero-party state, redeemed only by a man. Parties should exist, according to Ilyin, only to help ritualise elections." There could not have been a better redeemer than Putin, a witness and a participant in Russia's rise and decline. The man who has sent troops to Ukraine is the redeemer rearmed, daring the democratic usurper in Kyiv and the doddering lord of the free world in Washington. He dares to dare because history is on his side, history as written by the last Russian standing in the make-believe of an imperium.

As Snyder describes in his book, in his first speech in parliament as president, in 2012, Putin saw himself as *Vladimir*, the ruler of Kyiv. "The politics of eternity requires points in the past to which the present can cycle, demonstrating the innocence of the country, the right to rule of its leader, and the pointlessness of thinking about the future. Putin's first such point was the year 988, when his namesake, an early medieval warlord known in his time as Volodymyr or Valdemar, converted to Christianity. In Putin's myth of the past, Volodymyr/ Valdemar was a Russian whose conversion linked forever the lands of today's Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine." This sense of destiny is in combat with a world that has not yet lost faith in its weakened institutions such as NATO, EU and UN. Emperors floating in their own mythologies believe only in the politics of strength, and Putin doesn't see it coming from the talking shops of the West. As Ukraine reeled under the invasion, its president reportedly tried to call Putin but couldn't get through. He sent out an SOS to Russians. This plea for life and national dignity is the 21st century's moment of moral reckoning. Then this world is different from the one that emerged in the wake of 1945, and later, in 1989; this one is indifferent, in spite of the lofty noise, and it is led by lesser leaders who are tentative about freedom. It's the ideal playground for pumped-up imperialists to play out their wildest transborder fantasies. ■

OPEN DIARY

Swapan Dasgupta

IT IS PROBABLY tempting fate to suggest that this country—if not the world—is finally witnessing the end of Covid-19. Those of us who have come out of this pandemic relatively unscathed can count ourselves to be among the lucky minority. For most people, the experience of this deadly virus, whose origins are still a matter of conjecture, has been quite devastating. Many of us have lost relatives, friends, and others we knew. Even more have had their livelihoods destroyed, their lives altered, and their world reshaped. Students have lost two of their best years and the cumulative effects on educational standards are likely to be grave. It will be some time before the full effects of this horrible experience can be fully assessed, and I suspect that a full history of the Covid-19 devastation will take a few decades to emerge.

The past two years were testing times. It tested us as individuals, as families and as communities. Above all, in the case of India at least, it tested us as a nation. How did we fare?

Not too badly. When the pandemic hit the country, we were unprepared—as indeed were all countries—to deal with the monumental disruption, especially the experience of a total lockdown. The effects could have been catastrophic and had all the potential of triggering civil disturbances. Apart from a few hiccups caused by panic, that didn't happen. India withstood the earthquake with phenomenal resilience. However, this didn't happen simply because we as a people are naturally accustomed to digesting the good with the bad. It also happened because, for a change, the state machinery worked.

It worked in delivering free food to more than two-thirds of the population; it worked in getting the country vaccinated in record time; and it worked in using the lockdown to build capacity. Of course, there were inefficiencies and incompetence at play. Given the challenges and the sheer magnitude of the battle on the home front, it was expected that some would underperform. Indeed, some state governments behaved in a cavalier fashion and were bailed out because, in relative terms, the Centre showed remarkable purposefulness. The fact that pandemic management doesn't feature among the main campaign themes of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election tells an important story. Whether that will reflect in the outcome is, however, not guaranteed. But that is because public memory tends to be woefully short and there is also an inclination to believe that the solution to every problem lies with the government. We decry the *ma-baap sarkar* approach but politics seems to centre on precisely that belief.

If we are to make international comparisons, another facet of the Indian character comes to the fore: the popular ability to follow sensible orders. The wearing of masks, at least in public places, has now become obligatory, and most people have become accustomed to the habit. We may not like the use of masks but we nevertheless adhere to the rule because we understand it is for the common good. In a large section of the democratic West, however, the wearing of masks has been turned into an issue of personal freedom. To me this sounds utterly stupid and reckless, but try and argue this point with the libertarians of the right and left. Also, try and argue this point with some communities in India who acted on the belief that rules are for others, and their own fate is determined by God. I witnessed this in Kolkata where the deserted streets during the lockdown contrasted with the bustle of maskless activity in localities dominated by members of a particular community. I guess they, too, were exercising their civil liberties and the right to be contrarian.

In the West, it didn't stop at individual recklessness—or, as in the case of the UK, idiotic behaviour in the heart of the Prime Minister's 10 Downing Street office. In various European countries and, recently, in Canada, the temptation to take to the streets in protest against the Covid restrictions has proved irresistible. We in India didn't witness civil disturbances, although some of the post-lockdown restrictions were completely idiotic and, in some cases, politically vindictive. What instead happened was a quiet process of subversion. Around Christmas and New Year, for example, there was a 10.30PM night curfew in operation in and around Kolkata. Most people thought it needless. Therefore, while public places were shut, people moved around merrily in their cars and partied till the early hours. It was a good thing the police just looked the other way. Even they could recognise a bad rule. ■

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OPENINGS

NOTEBOOK

The Godfather at Fifty

WHAT MAKES A movie a cultural phenomenon? Something that can be as fresh and exciting 50 years on as it was on the day of its release? Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), based on Mario Puzo's 1969 novel, is that rarity. A story told with confidence, swagger and an immense belief in its own power.

It is after all the story of gangsters, thugs, of men who are dealing in guns and intimidation, blackmail and threat, hits and abductions. Yet, they all have a moral code. Thus far, and no further. They will not deal in drugs. They will not hurt women. They will never ever take sides against the family—the family that is held together by one of cinema's greatest patriarchs, Don Vito Corleone, who lives by his own principles, prime among them being that he has to be respected. "I refused to be a fool," he tells his son Michael in an emotional scene, "dancing on a string held by all those big shots."

Don Vito's was the American dream, that in time his son would be the one to hold the strings, as Senator Corleone or Governor Corleone, "but there wasn't enough time," he says, kissing his son's cheek.

"I believe in America." From the opening line itself, *The Godfather* embodies the American dream, which is not merely about money and the immigrant making it big, but also keeping the family together while doing so. And that, as *The Offer*, a spanking new Paramount+ series on the making of *The Godfather* suggests, is what lies at the heart of the classic. It is not merely a movie about gangsters, or crime, or the intertwining of crime, politics and showbiz. It is not merely a movie about horse heads and machine guns. It is not merely a movie about an Italian American family fighting with other Italian American families for control of the streets. It is a movie about fathers and sons, and about duty, honour and sacrifice. It is a movie about how we eventually become our parents, whether we like it or not. Michael's tragedy is that he becomes his father without the emotion, going from a war hero to a syndicate boss. Because it's all about the family.

> ***The Godfather* embodies the American dream, which is not merely about money and the immigrant making it big, but also keeping the family together while doing so. It is a movie about fathers and sons, and about duty, honour and sacrifice. It is a movie about how we eventually become our parents, whether we like it or not**

At the core of the film is the story about a father who loves his son and wants to protect him, and a son who loves his father and has no choice but to step into his shoes. It's about another son, Sonny, who believes he is the perfect successor to the family business, but is temperamentally unsuited for the job. It's about Fredo who is too weak to stand up for the family. It's about the daughter, Connie, whose husband beats her and cheats on her. That is why some of the most affecting scenes in the movie involve the family—the wedding scene that is intercut with meetings which establish Don Vito's power, and the baptism scene where his son Michael is unofficially declared the godfather as mayhem is unleashed on the streets of New York.

A man who doesn't spend time with his family is not a real man, says Don Vito. Family is everything. Our DNA is destiny. Blood is thicker than water. In *The Godfather*, every cliché is true and played for all its dramatic worth, but with a stunning flourish. The prized stallion's head in the studio boss' bed, the fish wrapped in Luca Brasi's bulletproof vest with the message that he sleeps with the fishes, Don Corleone's repeated instruction to his son, "the man who comes to you to set up a meeting, he is the traitor." It is the same reason a show like HBO's series, *Succession*, works—at the end of the day, it is about a media empire and who will run it, but it is also about who loves daddy the most, and whom does daddy love the most.

The Godfather's writing is not quite Shakespearean, but it is memorable. Consider it Hollywood's *Sholay*. Much of how we speak now is embellished by *The Godfather*'s great lines. "I'm gonna

ALAMY

Marlon Brando (centre) as Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather* (1972)

make him an offer he can't refuse." Or "revenge is a dish best served cold." Or "a friend should always underestimate your virtues and an enemy overestimate your faults." Or "it's not personal, it's business."

The Godfather set the mould for every gangster epic that has followed. It is a deeply masculine world where women are easily dispensed with. Some, like Michael's Italian wife, are blown to bits in a car bomb meant for him. Others like Connie are simply ignored. And yet, others like Michael's WASP wife are lied to. Their rebellions don't matter because they don't matter. As Don Vito says: "Women and children can be careless, but not men." The implication is clear—the women can treasure their Jane Austens and Charlotte Brontës, the men will worship *The Godfather*. It is their source of life lessons, their management mantras, their bro code. *The Godfather* liberates them from the morality imposed on them by society, authority and matriarchy. They can choose their consiglieres and their enforcers, their godfathers and their successors. The thrill of a secret society, where different rules apply, has engaged readers since the time of *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding's 1954 novel about a group of boys stranded on an island and trying to govern themselves. Who doesn't want to be rich, powerful, feared and respected? Who doesn't want to be the last resort of those whom the legal system has failed, whether it is the undertaker or the singer? Who doesn't want to be the guy who gets things done?

The Godfather is also a temple to male beauty. The almost irresistibly good-looking Al Pacino, shot in loving close-ups by Gordon Willis' camera, in a star-making turn, rendered even the gorgeous Diana Keaton invisible; Marlon Brando, with his artificially enhanced jowls, each line on the face seemingly earned in a war; the young Vito of *Godfather II*, played by an arrestingly young Robert De Niro. It is not an accident that the men are regarded as the greatest living actors of today, and that they cut their teeth on this epic. With the men in finely cut suits and the women in beautiful dresses, it also puts a gloss on what is essentially a grimy world. Even murder looks splendid, whether it is Sonny getting shot or the heads of the five families getting slayed.

Its influence is global, from gangster movies in India to *The Sopranos* in the US. *The Godfather* was set during the 10 years of intra-mafia gang wars (1945-1955) in New York. It could be transposed to the coal mafia gangs of Wasseypur or the America of the 1990s where gambling and racketeering was rife. But *The Godfather* is an original, with its eminently hummable theme music, its serenely-lit outdoor scenes and its profound tragedies. In another series, somewhat influenced by *The Godfather*, *Game of Thrones*, Cersei Lannister says to Littlefinger, "power is power." Sometimes, just showing a mirror to that, as *The Godfather* does, is enough. ■

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

IN MEMORIAM • KPAC LALITHA (1947-2022)

A CULTURAL ICON

Among the greatest actors of Kerala, she leaves an indelible imprint on the Malayali mind

IN ONE OF her television interviews, KPAC Lalitha, who passed away on February 22 at the age of 74, remembered how she would have a photo of the gods, Krishna and Shiva, in her bag as she travelled with her theatre group in the beginning of her career. Every day, when no one was there, she would take it out and burn an incense stick. Someone ratted on her. The director came in, checked her bag, took the photos out, and hurled them away in front of her, leaving her in tears. The reason was the group—Kerala People's Arts Club, whose initials became her own name—was made up of staunch communists in post-Independence Kerala when the movement was gathering critical mass. Indeed, it was one of the reasons why communism came to dominate not just politically but culturally in the state.

One of the earliest and most popular KPAC plays was called *Ningalenne Communistakki* (You Made Me A Communist), written by the man who would become the creative driver of KPAC—Thoppil Bhasi, an underground activist chased by the police even as the play was being staged. As the new medium of movies started becoming popular, Bhasi was at its forefront. In a blog, his son KPAC Soman would say about his father: "He wrote 16 plays, for KPAC, each more spectacular and socially relevant than its predecessor and it used to be said in the '60s and '70s that there wasn't a day where at least one of his plays was not staged at any part of Kerala! Such was the influence of his creative power. From KPAC, he slowly moved to the film industry (some say it was a natural progression), authoring over 100 screenplays, and turned to direct 16 movies in the Malayalam language, most of them box-office successes."

Courtesy **PHOENIX OPERANDS**

It is in this interregnum of the 1960s when the boundaries between theatre and movies were merging, that Lalitha found her space. Born Maheshwari Amma into a poor family, her father, too, was a communist and also underground for a while. Her ability to dance was noticed as a child and from there she came to theatre, and then eventually became a part of KPAC. The association with the Communist Party remained lifelong. When theatre—the plays and actors—merged into cinema, Lalitha too found herself part of it. In a career that only death ended, she appeared in close to 500 movies. The acting was effortless and, occasionally, she would get the movie where the full glory of her talent would shine through, as in the film *Amaram* (1991) where she played a fisherwoman. She got a National Award for it.

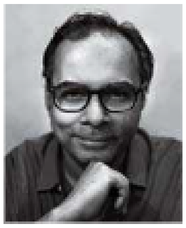
It was a movie directed by her husband Bharathan, one of the most gifted filmmakers the Malayalam film industry ever saw. He was among those who brought to the screen realism that also appealed to the public interest, the middle brow. The period of the 1980s and 1990s when this phenomenon achieved full glory was also responsible for a new crop of superstars like Mohanlal who were not just performers, but actors. Lalitha was in most of their movies.

It wasn't always a happy life. There were the tribulations of being a woman in a field rampant with sexual harassment, some of which she recounted in her autobiography. Her husband died young at 51 leaving behind debt, the legacy of his unrelenting need to make movies his way. Her house in Chennai was put on the block. She returned to Kerala and then worked to pay off all his loans. Just as there was stability, her son, an actor-turned-director, had an accident that almost killed him. She nursed him back to health until he found his footing in the industry again. Before she passed away from liver ailments, there was controversy when the government paid the medical expenses for a liver transplant. It led to a debate on why the taxpayer should bear the cost of a self-sufficient private individual. Her relationship with the Communist Party must have been part of the reason for such a favour. She always remained in that corner even if she never broke her faith in God, and was uninhibitedly religious. Many aspects could live together in her exuberant personality. ■

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

ANGLE

THE FALL OF LALU



From caste revolutionary to one more jail sentence

By MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI

THE FIRST TIME I went to Bihar was in 2009, a full four years after the end of the long reign of Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), but even then the memory of the anarchy was yet to be shed. You would be hard put to hear a bad word about Nitish Kumar, not because he had achieved any miracles, just ordinary law and order. Perhaps not even very good at that as compared to some of the better-run Indian states, but even the minimum of stability was a long way off from what Biharis had been used to. There is no halo over Nitish Kumar now because public memory really is short, but the momentum of pulling the state out of chaos has been enough to still maintain him as chief minister despite all the subsequent criticisms he has invited upon himself through his political turnings or doomed to fail populist measures like the ban on alcohol.

Lalu's personal or political influence, however, didn't diminish even after Bihar voted him out. He was a key constituent at the Centre and the myth continued to endure that all that Bihar suffered because of him was true, but it was in some way acceptable because he had given power to castes that had been oppressed for millennia. That social justice comes at a cost. As the layers equalised, there was bound to be ugly churn. But why? Mayawati came to power in Uttar Pradesh, and there have been no castes who have been more oppressed than the Dalits. Mayawati also had no compunction in making all sorts of necessary and unsavoury alliances, but she didn't let the state slide into the darkness of the abyss. The Hobson's Choice—social justice or law and order—was the false alternative that Lalu gave.

After the ascent of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the fall was inevitable. There was no shelter from the Union government. Court cases take time in India, but they never go away. Plus, there was age catching up and a politician without power grows old faster. Also, Nitish Kumar had outmanoeuvred him by getting into an embrace with BJP, something that Lalu could not do because that would alienate Muslim votes and without it, RJD would be almost irrelevant.

He has now got a five-year sentence in a corruption case that has taken almost a quarter of a century. It shouldn't take this long but that is the limit to how much even one of the most astute politicians can manage the system. There is discord within his dynasty even though a return to power for the party in Bihar seems tantalisingly close. And even if it does, there seems little hope of now enjoying a calm life of contemplation retired from politics for him. You might miss the trademark bombast on television but even if it were there, chances are the new generation of voters wouldn't be very impressed. ■

IDEAS

TIMING

The Life Insurance Corporation's (LIC) Initial Public Offering was to be the star of the government's ambitious disinvestment programme, and it was announced in last year's Budget when the stock markets were booming. But now with the drastic fall in the stock market after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, raising an amount that ranges anywhere from ₹50,000 crore upwards would be extremely difficult. Timing is crucial when capitalising on bull markets because they always end. But governments are not really tuned for urgency, unlike the private sector, where profit is the only driver. It might now have to either postpone the issue or sell for considerably less than what was planned. ■

WORD'S WORTH

'Observe due measure, for right timing is in all things the most important factor'

HESIOD GREEK POET

The Price of Austerity

What lies beneath the confidence of Ravana

IN THE SHIVA PURANA, Suta continued to tell the rishis about *jyotirlingams*, and now narrated the Vaidanatheshvara story.

Suta said, "Ravana was the best among *rakshasas*, and was respected. With respect and devotion, he worshipped Hara on Kailasa, supreme among mountains. Though the worship continued for a long time, Hara was not pleased. To please Shiva, he then embarked on other austerities. On the slope of Mount Himalaya, there is a spot known for bestowing *siddhi*. This is amidst a clump of trees towards the south. The prosperous Poulastya Ravana (Ravana was the son of Vishrava, who was the son of Pulastya) dug a pit in the ground there. O Brahmanas! He established a sacrificial fire there. He instated Shiva near this and offered oblations into the fire. In the summer, he stationed himself in the middle of five fires (four fires around and the sun overhead). During the rains, he slept on the bare ground. In the winter, he remained in water. Despite his performing many austerities, Mahesha, the *paramatman*, was not pleased. Evil-souled ones find it difficult to worship him. The great-souled Ravana, the lord of the *daityas*, then started to slice off his heads and used these to worship Shankara. As he severed each head, he followed the norms and worshipped Shiva. In this way, in due order, he cut off nine heads. When only one head was left, Shankara was pleased. Affectionate towards his devotees, he was satisfied and manifested himself. The lord healed the heads that had been severed earlier. He granted his wish of supreme and unmatched strength. Ravana, the *rakshasa*, thus obtained his favours. (Vaidya is a physician. Since Shiva healed Ravana, he is known as Vaidyanatheshvara. The *stotram* Ravana used to worship Shiva is known as Shiva *tandava stotram*.)

Ravana joined his hands in salutation and spoke to Shiva Shambhu. Ravana said, "O lord of Devas! If you are pleased with me, I will take you to Lanka. Please make my wish come true." When Shambhu was addressed by Ravana in this way, he faced a great difficulty. His mind wavering, Shiva said, "O best among *rakshasas*! With great devotion, take my excellent *lingam* to your own house. However, if you place the *lingam* down on the ground, it will remain stationary in that spot." Ravana agreed to this and taking the *lingam* with him, proceeded towards his own residence. As a result of Shiva's *maya*, he felt like passing urine along the way. Lord Ravana, born in the Poulastya lineage, was incapable of resisting this. He saw a *gopa* there and requested him to hold the *lingam*. (In some stories, this is Ganesha disguised as a boy.) After some time, oppressed by the weight, the *gopa* placed it down on the ground. The *lingam* was made out of the essence of the *vajra* and remained stationary there. It yields everything desired. If one sees it, all sins are destroyed. This *lingam* is named Vaidyanatheshvara. It is famous in the three worlds and bestows objects of pleasure and emancipation on the virtuous. This is the best among all the *jyotirlingams*. If one sees it, or worships it, all sins are destroyed. It is divine and excellent and enhances objects of pleasure. For the welfare of all the worlds, that *lingam* remained stationary there. Having obtained a great and excellent boon, Ravana returned to his own residence. Happy, the great *asura* told his beloved everything that had happened."

Suta continued, "Having obtained the great and excellent boon, Ravana returned home. Hearing this, all the devas, Shakra and the others, and the sages became anxious and spoke to each other. The devas and others said, "The evil-souled Ravana hates the devas. He is crooked and wicked in intelligence. Having obtained a boon from Shiva, he will inflict miseries on us. What will we do? What will happen next?" Dejected, they invited Narada and asked him. The devas said, "O supreme sage! You are capable of accomplishing every task. Devise a means to free the devas of their misery. Ravana is extremely wicked. What will he not do?" Narada replied, "O devas! I will do what is needed." Saying this, the *devarshi* went to Ravana's abode."

"When he reached, he was honoured with every kind of welcome. Narada said, "O supreme among *rakshasas*! You are blessed. You are a noble devotee of Shiva's, intent on austerities. Tell me everything about what you did and how you worshipped Shiva." Ravana answered, "O great sage! I went to Kailasa to undertake austerities. There, I tormented myself through terrible austerities for a very long period of time. When Shankara was not pleased, I returned to a clump of trees and performed austerities again. In the summer, I was in the middle of five fires. During the monsoon, I slept on the bare ground. In the winter, I remained inside water. But even then, Shankara was not pleased with me. As a result of this, I became angry and dug a pit in the ground. I instated a sacrificial fire there and fashioned a *parthiva lingam*. Following the norms, I worshipped Shambhu with fragrances, sandalwood, incense and many kinds of *naivedya*. To please Shankara, I prostrated myself and used sacred hymns, singing, dancing, the playing of musical instruments and the symbolic offering of my mouth and fingers. I used these and many other means sanctioned by the sacred texts to worship Bhagavan Hara. But even then, Bhagavan Hara was not satisfied and did not manifest himself in front of me. Since my austerities were unsuccessful, I was dejected. "Shame on my body and strength. Shame on my efforts at austerities." Saying this, I offered many oblations into the fire that had been instated. Then I thought, "I will offer my own body into the fire." I severed my heads and offered them into that purifying blaze. I severed them one by one and purified them in this way. I offered nine such heads to Shankara. When I was about to sever the tenth head, Hara himself appeared before me, in the form of a mass of radiance. Affectionate towards his devotees and delighted, he immediately spoke to me. "I am pleased. Tell me. I will give you the boon that your mind wishes for." Full of great devotion, I clasped my hands, prostrated myself and praised him. I said, "O lord of the devas! If you are pleased, what cannot be achieved by me? If this is the case, please grant me unmatched strength." When Shiva is satisfied, full of compassion, he bestows everything. He spoke words of assent, granting me what my mind wished for. His favourable glance is invincible, and is superior to the best of the *vaidyas*. When the *paramatman* looked at me, my heads were affixed again. In this way, my body became just what it had been earlier. Through his favours, I obtained all these fruits. Requested by me, Vrishadhvaja remained there. He is named Vaidyanatheshvara, and is famous in the three worlds. Maheshvara is in the form of the *jyotirlingam* and if one sees him, or worships him, one obtains objects of pleasure and emancipation. He brings welfare to all the worlds. Specifically, I worshipped that *jyotirlingam*. Having prostrated myself, I returned, to conquer the three worlds." Hearing his words, *devarshi* was alarmed."

"However, laughing in his mind, Narada spoke to Ravana. Narada said, "O best among *rakshasas*! I will tell you something that is beneficial for you. You just told me that Shiva bestowed all this on you for your welfare. But you should never accept what he said to be true. When he is in one of his aberrations, there is nothing he does not say. It may not be true. You are dear to me. How will one know it is true? For your own welfare, you should again go there and do the following. You should make efforts to raise up Kailasa. If you are able to raise up Kailasa, then there is no doubt that you have been successful in every possible way. Set it back where it was and happily return." Deluded by destiny, Ravana took these words to be beneficial for him. Taking the sage's words to be true, he went to Kailasa. Having gone there, he raised the mountain up. Everyone on the mountain suffered a catastrophe and fell over each other. Seeing this, Girija asked, "What is this?" Girija laughed and replied to Shambhu. Girija said, "These are the fruits of having a good disciple. This is indeed a true disciple. Such unmatched strength has been bestowed on an excellent hero, possessing a serene *atman*." Maheshvara heard Girija's words, which were laced with sarcasm. He thought that Ravana was ungrateful and insolent because of his strength. Therefore, he cursed him. Mahadeva said, "O Ravana! You are an evil devotee. You are evil-minded. Give up the insolence you possess. Soon, there will be a person who will rob your hands of their insolence." Narada heard everything that happened there. However, Ravana was also pleased in his mind and returned to his residence. Deluded by his strength, he was now supremely confident. As a result of Shiva's command, he obtained great energy and divine weapons. There was no warrior who could counter Ravana in a clash." ■

THE *LINGAM* WAS MADE OUT OF THE ESSENCE OF THE *VAJRA* AND REMAINED STATIONARY THERE. IT YIELDS EVERYTHING DESIRED. IF ONE SEES IT, ALL SINS ARE DESTROYED. THIS *LINGAM* IS NAMED VAIDYANATHESHVARA. IT IS FAMOUS IN THE THREE WORLDS AND BESTOWS OBJECTS OF PLEASURE AND EMANCIPATION ON THE VIRTUOUS

Two Men on a Mission

Why do Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli need to be best friends?

THE ROHIT SHARMA-Virat Kohli relationship has been a subject of continuous scrutiny in Indian cricket over the past couple of years. Each time Rohit had a mini slump in form, Virat was asked to comment on his vice captain and a possible tension between the two. And now that Rohit is in charge and Virat is going through a lean patch, questions are being directed at Rohit on Virat's future. Questions are fine but the underlying assumption that not all is well between the two is not. Behind every question is an attempt to get a juicy headline. If there is a word said by either of the two that is open-ended, it can and will be interpreted as a sign of rift. That India's two best don't see eye-to-eye is a great media story. The truth is, as Gautam Gambhir suggested to me the other day, not everyone needs to be friends in a cricket team. While referring to the inclusion of Krunal Pandya and Deepak Hooda in the Lucknow Super Giants franchise, Gambhir said, "When I was playing I was never best friends with everyone. But why do you even need to be best friends? All you need is to back each other when you are on the field. Be the best teammates, not friends. Share the same common vision on the field and not in your social space. It is wrong to assume that two players always need to be close friends to perform the best for the team."

This is what it is about. Whether Rohit and Virat are best friends shouldn't even be the subject of media scrutiny. Chances are they are not. Two huge achievers need not necessarily go out for family dinners with each other. What they do in their private space isn't relevant to us. What is of importance is how they back each other up on the field. And in that regard, they have been fantastic. From taking on the media to smiling away at negative questions, Rohit the captain has cocooned Virat each time he has had an opportunity. And as leader that's how it should be. Talk as they say is cheap and it doesn't really matter what the world says as long as the two superstars know what they are doing or need to do for Indian cricket.

Speculation that Rohit and Virat do not see eye-to-eye has now been around for years. And it has only grown since Virat stepped down from the T20 captaincy and when news came to light that Rohit was the next all-format captain. Many maintain the team is divided into camps and the captain and former captain aren't friends. Like I said earlier, do they need to be friends? Do two super achievers who are the two best players in the team need to be best friends to be able to serve Indian cricket? Do they need to get along socially to stay civil in the dressing room? Do their families need to go out for dinner as an indication of camaraderie? The overwhelming answer to each of these questions is "No". As long as they perform the best for India and serve Indian cricket, whether they are friends or not, or like each other's company, is not even our concern. In their private space whether they engage or argue is entirely their own thing and not relevant to Indian cricket.

Steve Waugh and Shane Warne presided over the best period in Australia's cricket history. The team was literally un-

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

beatable under skipper Waugh and his wrecker-in-chief, Warne. However, it is more than known that the two aren't best friends. In fact, that they don't get along is perhaps an understatement. But that did not pre-empt them from taking the Australian team to dizzying heights. On the field they were professionals exactly like Rohit and Virat are and had the sole focus—to win cricket matches for Australia. When Rohit and Virat bat in a World Cup game against Pakistan, for example, do they even bother about what each one feels socially about the other? Do such things even matter? Rather, they just bat to ensure one thing—India wins yet another World Cup contest against Pakistan.

The problem actually lies outside. We want them to be friends having assumed that unless they are, they can't do well for Indian cricket. Also, if they aren't great friends it is a good media story. The Rohit camp versus the Virat camp is a good headline. The truth is, every achiever will have an ego. If they don't, it is news. Not the other way round. Did Virender Sehwag not want to be Indian captain? Of course, he did. Unfortunately, it was the MSD (Mahendra Singh Dhoni) era and Viru had to contend with being a match winner for his country. But was he wrong to want to be captain? Was Warne wrong in wanting to captain Australia, for example? If Virat and Rohit want to outdo each other as performers, is that wrong in any way? Frankly, isn't that natural rivalry between two of the best players in the world?

We are all very upbeat about India's bowling attack at the moment. Bumrah, Shami, Siraj, Shardul, Ishant are all doing great and it augurs well for Indian cricket that they are. However, does that mean Bumrah and Shami aren't trying to outdo each other? Does it not seem fair that two quality bowlers will strive to win the mantle of the team's main strike bowler? How is such a thing unhealthy and a subject of intense speculation?

I have known both Virat and Rohit for years and must say they are two very different personalities but have one common goal—excellence. They might well have very different routes to success but the ultimate goal remains the same—winning tournaments for India. When I had interviewed Rohit soon after he scored the five hundreds in the World Cup in 2019, my assumption was he would be super pleased with his own performance. The reality was that he wasn't. He kept saying, "What's the point in all these hundreds if the trophy has gone to another dressing room?" Rohit was disappointed in not being able to get the real job done and individual accolades did not matter to him. The same would be true for Virat. In a team sport, it is ultimately about the team and never about the individual.

Gary Kirsten had once outlined this rather beautifully to me. It was the morning after India had beaten Pakistan in Mohali in the semi-final of the 2011 World Cup. People had partied till very late into the night and the morning was quiet and calm. Kirsten, along with Paddy Upton, was having breakfast in the team hotel when I happened to meet him. I remember congratulating him for the victory and saying to him that he had built a great team with the bonding in the team looking excellent. That's when Gary had helped put things in perspective. "Do you think all the 11 players who played are friends?" he asked me. "Do they really need to be?" he went on. "All I want is when the final catch goes up each of the 15 members should pray that the catch is taken for the country. If after that they don't dine with each other or spend social time with each other it doesn't even matter to me," he concluded.

There can't be truer words. Gary Kirsten had also outlined the essence of corporate philosophy. Not everyone can be a friend of the other in a large corporation but each will have to stand up for the institution they work for. That's all that is asked. In the case of Rohit and Virat, that's all that matters really. We want them to be at their best in the upcoming World Cup and try and do a job for India. Who's friends with whom is a subject best left to OTT scriptwriters. That's reel. The real is two men who are thorough professionals trying to do a job for the country. With the World Cup seven months away, it is time we left it at that and just backed both to try and win an ICC Trophy for India after nine years. ■

I HAVE KNOWN BOTH VIRAT AND ROHIT FOR YEARS AND MUST SAY THEY ARE TWO VERY DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES BUT HAVE ONE COMMON GOAL—EXCELLENCE. THEY COULD HAVE VERY DIFFERENT ROUTES TO SUCCESS BUT THE ULTIMATE GOAL REMAINS THE SAME—WINNING TOURNAMENTS FOR INDIA

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GLOBALSUTRA | **Pallavi Aiyar**

The Clasp of Civilisations

Traces of India from China to Spain show culture is never static

To a wise man, the whole earth is open
—Democritus

TO BE TERRITORIALLY polygamous, as I have been, is to have inculcated a sense of capaciousness that expands the metaphorical contours of 'home'. The more I have travelled, the more I have discovered how political borders obscure fundamental truths. For as much as we try and match national narratives to the tidy geometry of maps, our histories have in fact been messy, cross-pollinated and multiple.

The result is the constant shock of recognition. There is always something of what you consider to be your own, in even the most 'foreign' of lands. China, for example—a country I lived in for almost a decade—was no longer inscrutable once I'd discovered that strangers addressed each other as family: auntie, grandmother, older brother. Rural folk shared their boiled eggs and oranges with me on cross-country bus journeys, reminiscent of similar trips in India. In the unlikeliest of places—outside the Great Mosque in Xi'an, or in a taxi in the far northeastern city of Harbin—people sang old Hindi movie songs like '*Awaran Hoon*'.

On a visit to the most hallowed of Chinese landscapes—the misty Song mountains in Luoyang, home to the fabled Shaolin monastery—the large bronze statue at the entrance to the temple looked strangely familiar, almost Indian. The reason, I learned, was that it was in fact a likeness of Bodhidharma (Damo in Chinese), an Indian monk who had founded the Chan or Zen school of Buddhism in 517 CE and is credited with having developed the style of kung-fu that Shaolin is renowned for.

In Indonesia, references to the Hindu epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata are embedded in the language, on street hoardings and political commentary. When I lived in Jakarta (between 2012 and 2016), my local mechanic was called Rama Repairs and my neighbourhood shopping mall was Dharmawangsa Square. I came across a nationwide charitable foundation for twins called the Nakula and Sadewa society, and a support group for Indonesian women in mixed marriages named Srikandi (Shikhandi).

Buses were painted with large advertisements for an energy drink called Kuku Bima, which promised the imbiber Bhima-like endurance. One of the most congested arteries in the city centre, Gatot Subroto, was named after a much-feted army general. An appropriate name, as Gatot is a diminutive for Ghatotkacha, Bhima's fearsome, half-demon, warrior son.

I also recognised the eclecticism of street traffic in Jakarta, where fancy SUVs shared space with motorbike taxis, which in turn jostled against brightly painted three-wheeler scooters locally referred to as Bajai. It transpired that Indonesia had been importing two-stroke autorickshaws from India for decades. The term "Bajai" derives from their Indian brand name, Bajaj.

Of all the countries I've lived in, Japan with its aural hush, preternatural punctuality and obsessive cleanliness is arguably the closest to an Indian 'other'. And yet when I moved there in 2016, there was a visceral familiarity to the way people folded their hands into a 'Namaste' at temples, and indeed in the idolatry on display in the temples themselves.

Early Buddhism was deeply intertwined with Hinduism. Consequently, many Japanese schools of Buddhism, especially those influenced by tantric thought, adopted Brahmanic and Hindu devas (ten). Some of these were co-opted in their extant forms while others became associated with certain bodhisattvas. The Hindu God Shiva (*Daijizaiten*), for example, was associated with Avalokitesvara or Kannon, while Brahma (*Bonten*) was linked to Manjusri.

Hindu deities were commonly incorporated as guardian spirits. Some, like Indra (*Taishakuten*) and Varuna (*Raijin*) are ubiquitous at the entrances to Japanese temples. Saraswati (*Benzaiten*) is particularly popular and has hundreds of temples dedicated to her across the country. The physical form of these devas has been rendered unrecognisable by their journey beyond the Himalayas and across the Sea of Japan. Yet, the edifice of belief and ritual surrounding them remains a palpable connect with India.

All the examples I've given so far are from Asia, a region that over the centuries has been bound in a civilisational embrace underpinned by pilgrims, traders, and soldiers. But even in faraway Spain, the country I now call home, there is much that instantly feels mine.

Both Spaniards and Indians are unguarded physically, unselfconsciously loud, and terminally social. And beyond personality traits, we share an Islamic heritage, so that many of the jewels of our 'national' patrimony are architectural siblings. The echoes of the geometric effervescence of the Alhambra in Spain's Granada are loud in any of the great forts and palaces of the Indian Mughals.

Then there is the language. '*Ojala*', which means 'hopefully' in Spanish, has its root in '*insh'allah*'. So that every time a Spaniard says something akin to, "Hopefully, we'll meet soon," they are etymologically invoking the grace of God (Allah).

Modern Spanish has thousands of words with Arab roots, linking it in a string of lexical pearls to Hindi/Hindustani, given the latter's debt to Persian-mediated Arabic. Consider the words for sugar: *azúcar* in Spanish derives from the Mozarabic (Arabic influenced Spanish that developed between the 7th and 15th centuries) *assúkar*, in turn from the classical Arabic *sukkar*. In Hindustani it is *shakkar*.

Or the words for chess: *Ajedrez* in Spanish comes from the Mozarabic *aššaṭran*, which has its root in the classical Arabic, *šiṭranǧ*. In Hindustani it is *shatranj*.

There is more. The most iconic demographic of the country—the gitanos or gypsies—identify strongly with India, the land that they trace their origins to. I realised this upon finding myself in a cinch with a gypsy flamenco singer in a smoky tavern in Madrid. I'd been only one amongst the musician's many adoring fans until he learned that I was Indian. "I am from India too," he'd said, tapping his chest with an open palm before gathering me up for a hug.

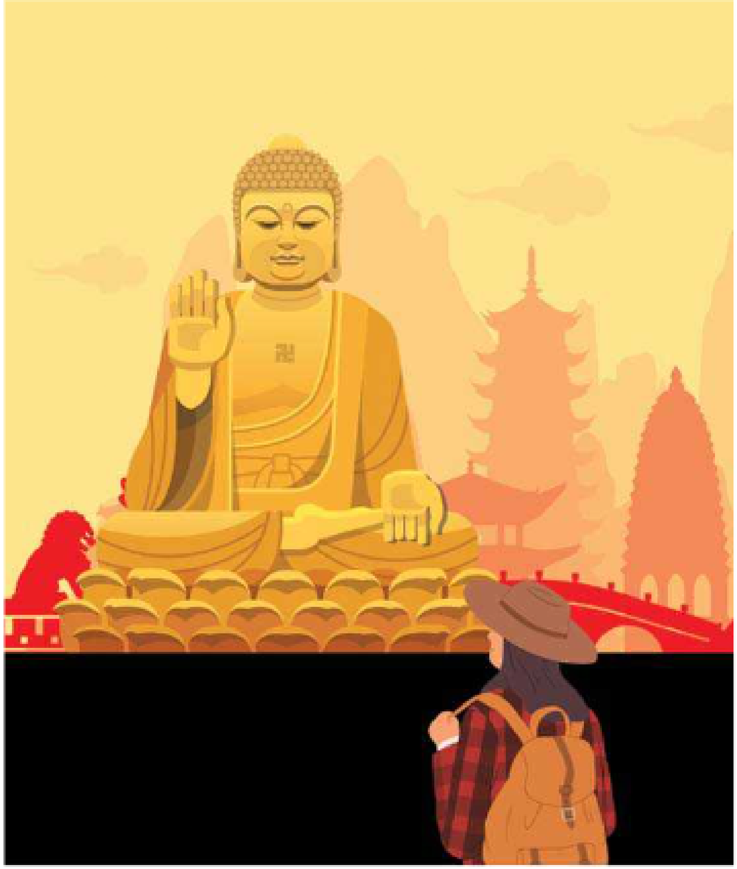
Gitanos, of which there are upwards of 750,000 in Spain, do not have a well-documented history. But they are believed to have entered the region during the 15th century. Linguistic analysis of Romani (gypsy) dialects shows that they originated in northwestern India and migrated westwards in waves, between 300 BCE and 600 CE.

The language of Spanish gypsies is called caló and some Spanish sources refer to the people as *calé* referring to their darker skin, since in caló, *calé* means black. The 'c' is hard, so the word is pronounced *kale*. Sound familiar?

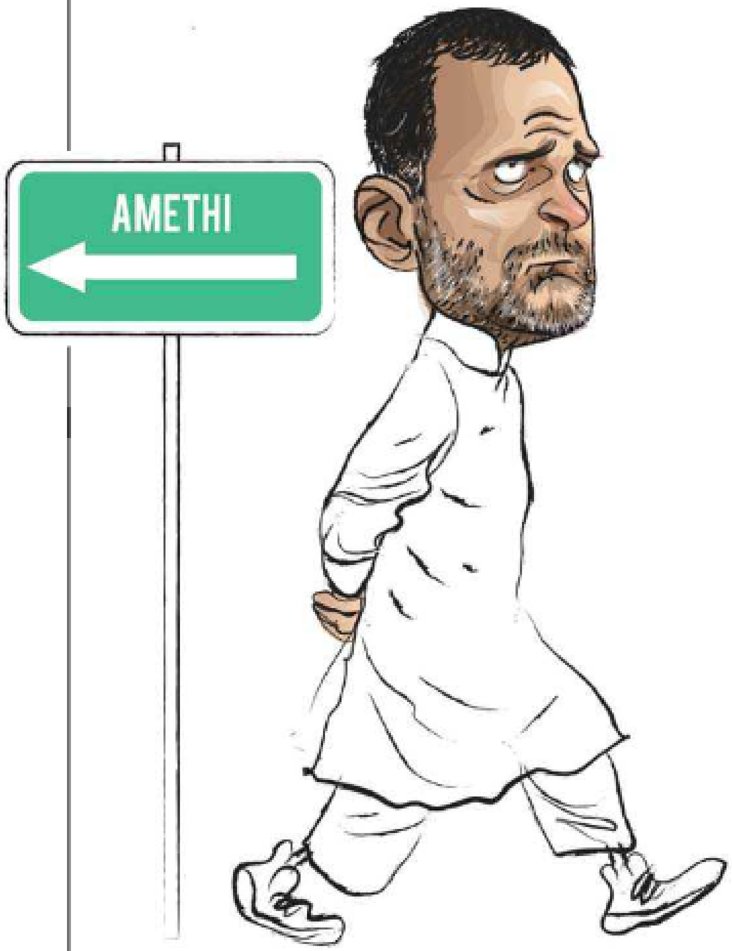
One of the most delicious stories of Indo-Spanish linguistic connect, courtesy the gitanos, has to do with the spicy sausage so emblematic of Spain: the chorizo. The word in Spanish not only refers to the cold cut but is also slang for a thief, deriving from the caló term *chori* for thief. Which explains how India's *chors* became chorizos in Spain.

What this whirl around the world demonstrates is that culture isn't static. It is like shot silk, changing colours in different light. It can slip through cracks, heedless of walls and borders. Us and them is a deceptive dichotomy, something that travellers have been aware of for long. The philosopher Democritus of Abdera had it right all the way back in 420 BCE when he said, "To a wise man, the whole earth is open; for the native land of a good soul is the whole earth." ■

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH



MANY JAPANESE SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM, ESPECIALLY THOSE INFLUENCED BY TANTRIC THOUGHT, ADOPTED BRAHMANIC AND HINDU DEVAS (*TEN*). SOME OF THESE WERE CO-OPTED IN THEIR EXTANT FORMS WHILE OTHERS BECAME ASSOCIATED WITH CERTAIN BODHISATTVAS



RAHUL'S CHOICE

SMRITI IRANI SEEMS rooted in her Amethi Lok Sabha constituency and visits it regularly. But the gossip is that the Gandhi family, particularly Rahul Gandhi, is not keen on contesting from Amethi again. He will fight only from Kerala. Also, Sonia Gandhi is not eager to fight from Raebareli. But Priyanka Gandhi is likely to contest in the Lok Sabha elections in 2024 since her children have, admittedly, grown up. She has time to spare. Senior Congress leaders, however, feel that if Rahul were to lead Congress in 2024, he should not vacate the north. Instead, he could fight from Raebareli, and Priyanka could take up the cudgels from Amethi. In that case, Smriti might go all out against Rahul in Raebareli.

DRIVE AGAIN

After the UP Assembly election, the Congress high command is planning to revamp the party membership drive overseen by Congress leader Madhusudan Mistry. The drive had started from the room of Congress leader Bhakta Charan Das at the All India Congress Committee office in New Delhi. As Mistry reviewed the drive, glitches were found, and it was decided to remove a bulk of the pradesh returning officers (PROs). The new membership drive will get underway soon.

The Stakeholders

As the name game for the vice president's post hots up, Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad Khan and West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar seem top contenders. Though Khan is a minority representative, Dhankhar seems to have stronger credentials with a good legal background. He has a clear understanding of the Constitution and was even the parliamentary affairs minister (1989-90). Other names doing the rounds for the post are those of Ghulam Nabi Azad and Sumitra Mahajan.

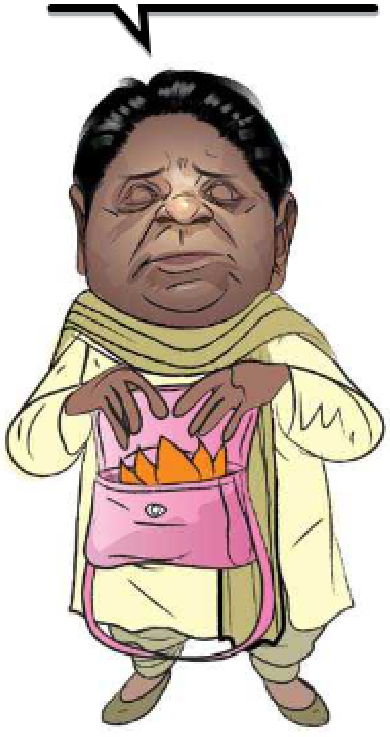
Young Vows

In Kerala, the youngest mayor of the country, Arya Rajendran, 22, is set to tie the knot with the youngest MLA in the state Assembly, Sachin Dev, 28. Both were members of the Students' Federation of India (SFI), the student arm of CPM. Rajendran is the mayor of Thiruvananthapuram. Reportedly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is in the know, too, and has advised his team to wish the couple as soon as the date is finalised.

Illustrations by **SAURABH SINGH**

A NEW LIFE?

What is the roadmap of Mayawati's politics? Is she ready to retire now? Or is she preparing for a future role in national politics? Mayawati is now very close to BJP and her man Friday Satish Mishra, the retired Brahmin bureaucrat, maintains an equation with the BJP brass. It has set tongues wagging that Mayawati may be interested in being the first Dalit president by consensus. And in case BJP endorses her, if the rumour is to be believed, she can even merge her party with the former. For BJP, it will be a case of consolidation with the upper castes and Dalits coming into its fold.



STRATEGY MEET

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, we learn, is not in favour of severing ties with political strategist Prashant Kishor. She had, in fact, invited Kishor and his best friend, Trinamool Congress Vice President Pavan K Varma, to the last core group meeting. Though the duo could not make it then, Banerjee has invited Kishor over and a meeting is expected soon.

Come Together

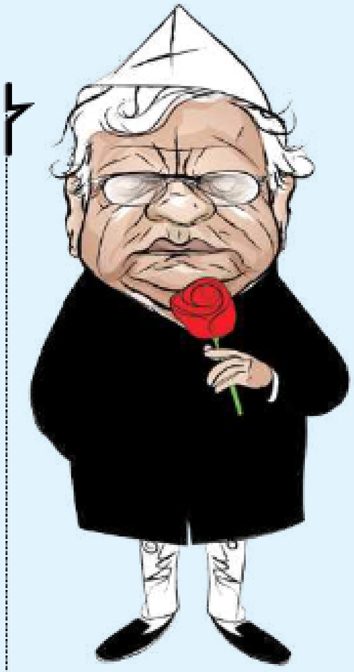
Many G23 dissenters are trying to buy peace with Rahul Gandhi, including Shashi Tharoor, Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Prithviraj Chavan. They hold a grudge against Ghulam Nabi Azad for leaving them in the lurch. And there is a growing buzz in Congress circles that Azad is set to form a regional party in Jammu and Kashmir where Assembly polls may be held along with Karnataka or Gujarat later this year. Now, Congress is expected to do well in Uttarakhand, and disgruntled party leaders feel a good showing in Punjab and Goa would further bolster the party, while a poor performance may force Rahul to prop up someone else as the next party president.

FRESH OVERTURES

Following the state Assembly election results, Mamata Banerjee is planning to visit New Delhi on March 10, four days before the Budget Session of Parliament reconvenes, for two-three days. Banerjee is learnt to be keen on forming a national alliance against BJP and is not averse to talking to Sonia Gandhi. Banerjee understands Congress needs the support of regional parties, like her TMC, to take on BJP.

Neighbour Watch

Shimla recently witnessed high-level backchannel diplomacy between India and Bangladesh. Several Bangladesh ministers were present, along with BJP MP MJ Akbar and member of the National Executive of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Ram Madhav. It was an opportunity for the Indian side to get to know their neighbour better, particularly after the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh.



THINK TANK

After Ahmed Patel's death, Sonia Gandhi is learnt to have got close to none other than CPM leader Sitaram Yechury who, with a Nehruvian mindset, comes closest to Congress ideologically, unlike others in his party. Rumour has it that Yechury's mandate now is to promote MK Stalin of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) over Mamata Banerjee's TMC. So, Yechury wants to form a Congress-DMK alliance to take a lead in opposition politics at the expense of the TMC-Telangana Rashtra Samithi-Nationalist Congress Party tie-up after the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election. Perhaps, Yechury wants Banerjee's non-BJP chief ministers' conference to come a cropper.

SOUTHERN COMFORT

In the last presidential election, while the media kept guessing the name of the candidate for the top post, Ram Nath Kovind's candidature took everyone by surprise. This year, too, with the election slated to be held in April, Nitish Kumar's name and those of a few others have been reportedly doing the rounds, including Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu's. If Naidu became president, he might get the support of both the Telangana and Andhra Pradesh chief ministers since he is from that region. Besides, he is known to be non-controversial and had a stellar innings as the chairman of Rajya Sabha. Also, he is a favourite with some members of the opposition.

By BEENA SARWAR

JUST LIKE US

From the dark years of Zia in Pakistan to the hijab row in India

WOMEN ACROSS SOUTH Asia and beyond have for centuries loosely covered their heads and bosoms, regardless of religion, shielding themselves from unrelated men as well as from the hot sun.

Women entering the workforce in urban areas have been quicker to shed traditional attire. Those who find these changes threatening sometimes find ways to keep women in their place. Religion offers a convenient pretext.

The more conservative Muslim women in South Asia also traditionally wore a burqa, more all-enveloping than a *chaddar* or dupatta. My grandmother in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, used to wear a brown burqa that she discarded eventually in Karachi.

Growing up in Pakistan under the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq, 1978-88, women like me have firsthand experience of such tactics. We watch in horror as shadows of the Zia dark years seem to spread across the border into India.

"You have turned out to be just like us," wrote the Pakistani poet Fahmida Riaz, addressing Indians after the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. "Where were you hiding until now, brother?"

It was this tragic event initiated by the Hindu rightwing that contributed to the Indian Muslims' growing sense of insecurity and allowed radical Muslims to gain ground, and gave rise to identity politics.

With her political acumen, Fahmida Riaz would have known, of course, that we have always been alike, the protestations of our rightwing constituencies notwithstanding. The killing fields of Punjab and Bengal in 1947 proved this. Mob violence and lynchings in the name of religion over the past years have provided further proof. So does how we treat our poor and vulnerable communities. Does the "hijab row" that started in Karnataka belong in this list? It's a question worth considering.

Coming back to traditional standards of modesty for South Asian women, in cities, it has long been enough for women to wear a dupatta, the long, flimsy piece of cloth that traditionally covers the head and bosom. With modernisation/Westernisation, the dupatta increasingly became a token to complete an outfit, relegated to one shoulder, flung across the neck, or removed altogether.

As an intern at the daily *The Star* in Karachi, 1981-82, I'd go to work in a salwar kameez, often without a dupatta. Some of the other women journalists wore dupattas, some didn't. The men we worked with, or encountered on our way to work, didn't bother us. It was simply not an issue.

But General Zia's military dictatorship made it into one. Trying to legitimise his rule on the pretext of religion—Pakistan wasn't 'Islamic' enough—General Zia began to clamp down on women's freedom.

The military regime's obsession with overclad women extended to the sham parliament where the general would present women with *chaddars*—a heavier, larger version of the dupatta.

When women on television were directed to cover their heads, one newscaster resigned. Interestingly, across the border in India, we heard that women newscasters in Amritsar were also asked to cover their heads—it's part of Punjabi culture, they said.

Meanwhile, in Pakistan, the rhetoric of '*chaddar* and *char-dewari*' (purdah and the four walls of the home) began being touted as a

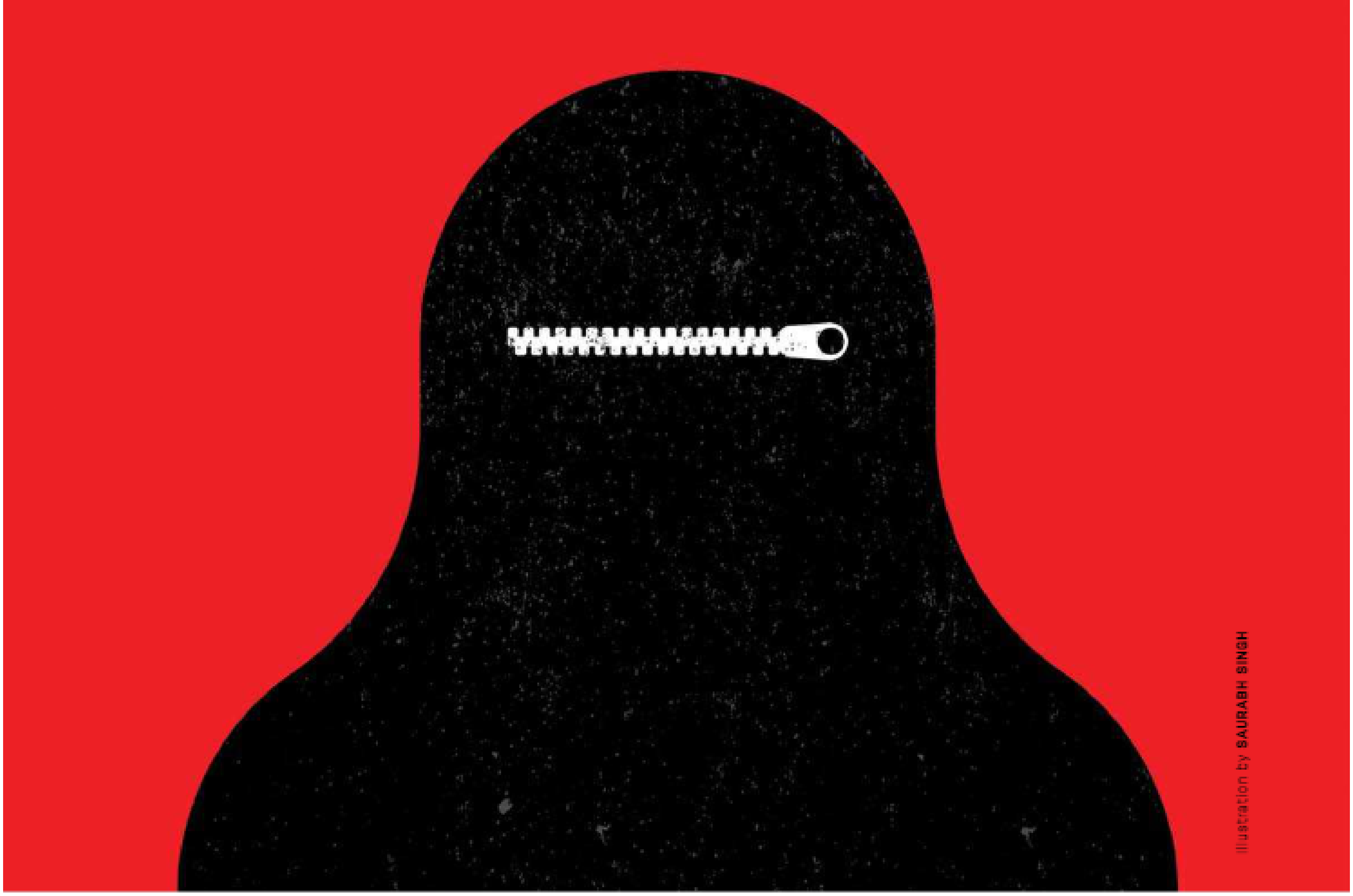


Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

WOMEN IN MUSLIM-MAJORITY PAKISTAN HARDLY NEED SUPPORT TO ASSERT THEIR MUSLIM IDENTITIES. IN INDIA, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT DESPITE THE ONSLAUGHT OF HINDUTVA, MUSLIM WOMEN HAVE BEEN MAKING STRIDES. BESIDES EDUCATION, THEY ARE STEADILY ADVANCING ON VARIOUS FRONTS. AND THAT IS VERY THREATENING NOT JUST TO THE MUSLIM ORTHODOXY BUT ALSO TO THE HINDUTVA LOBBY

prerequisite for women's safety.

I hit back in the only way I knew. I typed out a satirical piece titled 'A hundred and one uses of a chadar', and illustrated it with single-column cartoons.

If you cursed yourself during a journey where you found yourself without napkins to wipe the kids' hands, I wrote, "you are one of the so-called 'liberated and modern' women, uninitiated and chadar-less, who have not yet seen the light." I listed various creative uses for the garment, including "pretend to be a laundry bag" to hide from unwelcome guests or "refuse to let a doctor near you on the grounds that you are too modest."

"Yes indeed, a chadar is one of the most useful and absolutely essential items of a woman's wardrobe. Without it you are nowhere. There are so many uses for it, once you've experienced its dependability and durability, you will never want to be without it."

CAN'T SAY THE same for the "hijab", a tight head covering that originated in the Middle East, and gradually made its way into South Asian culture in the 1980s. This coincided with the export of manpower and labour from the region to the Gulf states as well as the geopolitics in the neighbourhood.

America's entry into Afghanistan via its proxy Pakistan transformed the Afghans' national war of liberation against the Soviets into a 'holy war', a jihad backed by Saudi Arabia seeking to assert its brand of Wahhabi Islam against the Shia Islam making waves through the Iranian Revolution.

The hijab first became visible in south India with its strong connections to the Gulf states, much before it spread to the north. The phenomenon prompted a young journalist from Kerala in 2009 to pitch a piece on the rise of the hijab in her region to the online publication *TwoCircles.net*. The piece contains interviews of several women and concludes that while the hijab used to be viewed as a sign of oppression, that narrative "failed as more and more educated women are turning to the hijab."

Opposition to the garment is based on fear, she commented. "A fear of what would happen if women get to know and practise Islam well. The fear that traditional leaders have of the loss of their authority. However, women who wear the hijab feel safe, secure and confident. And that helps them to succeed." ("Hijab in

Kerala: The transformation from ignorance to knowledge', Najiya O, *TwoCircles.net*, August 8, 2009; *https://bit.ly/3BHnbXe.*)

It's not just a symbol of religious identity but "also a fashion statement and a way to connect to and be part of a global conversation," comments Boston-based biotech professional Kashif-ul-Huda, Indian-origin founder and former editor of *TwoCircles.net*.

"It's complicated", as he says. Not all scholars agree that Muslim women must wear the hijab. Some uphold the view that the real purdah lies in the eyes.

In 1993, about 10 years after my little satire on the *chaddar*, as a features editor with *The Frontier Post* in Lahore, I commissioned a journalist in the industrial town of Faisalabad (former Lyallpur) to report on the education department's directive to college principals telling female students to cover their heads to and from school. The ministry of religious affairs had jumped in, directing the principals to report back with their compliance.

Aurat Azadi March in Karachi, March 8, 2021

عورت دھرنا
8 MARCH 2021

AFP

I wanted to highlight the pressures on young women. If they want to cover their heads, they should be allowed to do so, I reasoned. They don't need a directive from the men at educational or religious ministries telling them what to wear and how to wear it.

The onslaught has continued, with women's clothes and bodies being increasingly politicised.

THE PUSHBACK FROM working women and activists has led to some gains. There are also setbacks. In general, women in Pakistan have increasingly been pushed into "covering" at least in urban public spaces. For rural women, the question doesn't generally arise.

In 2018, women's groups initiated a celebration of women's rights on International Women's Day, March 8, called the "Aurat Azadi (women's freedom) March". Held in cities across the country, it has become an annual event, observed even in small towns and villages. The more popular it gets, the more threatened the orthodox elements of society feel.

In past years, some participants carried placards with slogans that irked those holding conservative, traditional views. These slogans have been used as a pretext to attack the entire event, and to ban it.

The ministry of religious affairs in Pakistan has now urged the government to declare March 8, International Women's Day, as "Hijab Day" in Pakistan. Really?

There is already an annual World Hijab Day, started on the first day of February in 2013 by an American Muslim woman in New York. Which makes sense if you're trying to assert your Muslim identity, particularly, as an immigrant.

Women in Muslim-majority Pakistan hardly need support and solidarity to assert their Muslim identities.

In neighbouring India, it is worth noting that despite the onslaught of Hindutva supremacy, Muslim women have been making strides. They hold top ranks in universities across the country. Besides education, they are steadily advancing on various fronts, including financially, politically and culturally.

Kashif-ul-Huda shares an anecdote from a few years ago, when he visited India and spoke to a largely Muslim college audience in Azamgarh, UP. Towards the end, he asked how many of the female students wanted to go abroad.

All hands went up. Why?

"Ambition. They are all very ambitious."

And that is very threatening not just to the Muslim orthodoxy, but also to the Hindutva lobby. You are just like us, after all, as Fahmida Riaz said. No surprise that vested interests are using the hijab row to advance their own agendas, with competitive communalism further hardening positions.

Many of the protests are clearly orchestrated, with rightwing organisations handing out saffron scarves to students to stage protests, as investigative journalists have revealed. ('TNM Investigation: How Hindutva group mobilised saffron-clad students at Udupi college', February 9, 2022; *https://bit.ly/3IgV1Vx.*)

This is politically convenient for the ruling party as the senior journalist Prem Shankar Jha has outlined in a recent piece: "Like the Pulwama suicide bombing in 2019, the hijab controversy has come as an unsolicited gift to a BJP government that has been on its back feet since its mishandling of the COVID-19 crisis last year. ('Thanks to the Hijab Issue, India is Falling Once More into the Communal Trap', *The Wire*, February 2022; *https://bit.ly/3JNyqAp.*)

In the end, the issue is not about uniforms and hijabs, but upholding power politics and keeping Muslim women down. Having seen the pattern in Pakistan, it's sad to see it being replicated in India. ■

Beena Sarwar is a Pakistan-born and Boston-based journalist, peace activist and documentary filmmaker

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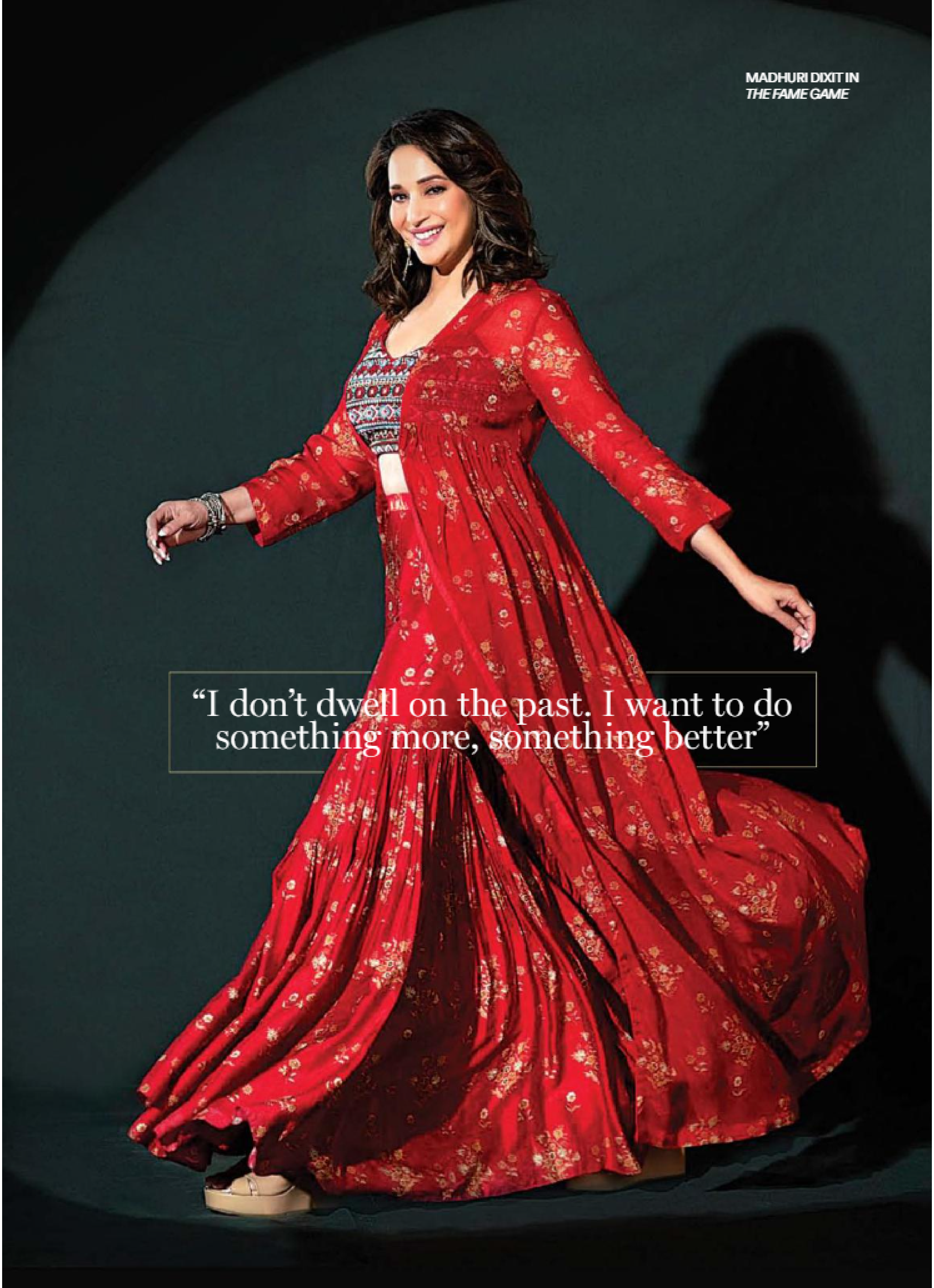
The Return of THE QUEEN

MADHURI DIXIT SET THE TEMPLATE FOR THE MODERN-DAY HEROINE IN BOLLYWOOD AND NOW SHE IS BACK TO CHALLENGE IT IN A NEW SERIES THAT CASTS HER AS AN AGEING DIVA

By KAVEREE BAMZAI

There's a moment in *The Fame Game*, Netflix's new series starring the iconic Madhuri Dixit, when a young actress walks up to her and seeks her blessings, telling her how she and her mother are huge fans. The famous smile becomes icier with every word, and Madhuri, who is playing an ageing actress, says with a laugh: "You young stars have everything. PR, stylists, trainers. Actually you don't even need talent, let alone my blessings." The sarcasm is lost on the younger woman, as Madhuri aka her character Anamika Anand moves on.

It's happened to Madhuri in real life too. She recounts the latest such incident with a laugh: "It's funny when we were launching the trailer, Bejoy (Nambiar, the co-director) said the first time he saw me was when



MADHURI DIXIT IN *THE FAME GAME*

“I don’t dwell on the past. I want to do something more, something better” he was in school, and I said, when you were in school, so was I, working in films." Indeed. Madhuri, who will turn 55 this year, began in *Abodh* in 1984, playing a naive, pigtailed villager who marries Tapas Paul but doesn't understand what it entails. Just for context, the three Khans, her contemporaries, made it big on the small and big screens four years later.

She has been through the worst phase of the film industry, when women were infantilised, given bows and bands in their hair, made to wear shimmering pink lipstick and glittering blue eyeshadow, and given costumes fit for plastic dolls. She has survived rumours of affairs (with co-star Sanjay Dutt), a terrible case of acne, a kissing scene in *Dayavan* (1988) which she regrets to this day, and a media that wrote her off as often as it declared her the new No 1. Yet she survived and thrived, setting the template for the Hindi film heroine: homegrown beauty, dancing skills and a girl-next-door charm which made the audience relate to her. As film scholar Aysha Viswamohan says, Madhuri owned the 1990s. "One has to be part of a generation that has witnessed her blockbusters like *Dil* (1990), *Beta* (1992) and above all *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994) to understand the Madhuri magic. She could effortlessly straddle the boundaries between being a glam doll and a simple middle-class girl. She was the last of the female stars who ruled the single-screen theatres," she says.

Madonna and belladonna. Sati Savitri and seductress. The emblematic actress and the item girl. There are many Madhuris. There is Mohini from *Tezaab* (1988) dancing for her alcoholic father; Nisha from *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* sacrificing her love for the family; Pooja from *Dil to Pagal Hai* (1997), in a sleek leotard engaged in a dance-off with the svelte Karisma Kapoor; Anjali from *Pukar* (2000), ready to spy and die for her beloved; Begum Para in *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014), making Naseeruddin Shah's Khalujaan, Vijay Raaz's Jaan Mohammad and Huma Qureshi's Muniya fall in love with her. And now finally as Anamika in *The Fame Game*, staring into her lover's face, telling him it's time for her to do something for herself.

"A FABULOUS DANCER WITH A MILLION-DOLLAR SMILE. SHE'S A BORN ACTRESS WHO BLOSSOMED INTO A BIG STAR. SHE HAS MADE IT ON HER OWN WITH THE SUPPORT OF HER PARENTS"

Anil Kapoor actor

"GROWING UP IN PENNSYLVANIA IN THE 1990s, SHE WAS OUR CONNECTION TO INDIA. SHE WAS SUCH A BRILLIANT DANCER WHICH SOMETIMES OVERSHADOWED THE FACT THAT SHE IS THE GREATEST LIVING ACTRESS IN INDIA TODAY. AND SHE HAS ONLY BECOME MORE INTERESTING WITH AGE"

Sri Rao writer, *The Fame Game*

Ageless. Timeless. Peerless. In a career spanning 38 years, is it any wonder we have so many Madhuri Dixits to reclaim and revisit? And then there is the Madhuri of the dance contests, the online dance platform she has launched, and the Instagram reels, dancing like no one is watching, smiling to fans, cooking with her husband, singing with her older boy, and now even wanting to learn tennis. "I don't dwell on the past," she says, her 12 years in the US echoing in a faint twang. "It's done, let's move on. I want to do something more, something better all the time. There's always something new to learn," she says, sitting in a white pantsuit, one leg propped up on the chair, the other swinging slightly, her high heels abandoned. She is the picture of grace, comfort, ease.

It wasn't always so.

She started out as a nervous newbie with two pigtails and thin arms in *Abodh* at the age of 17, and would have remained a footnote from a forgotten film had three men not decided to reinvent her career. They released a six-page ad in the film weekly *Screen*, listing the names of eight directors who were keen to work with the young actress. Despite five flop films before this, the announcement gave Madhuri the sheen of a newcomer. The men: producer Boney Kapoor; his brother, actor Anil Kapoor's secretary, Rakesh Nath; and director Subhash Ghai, then at the height of his fame, who had picturised a song on her in *Karma* (1986) and then edited it out, but then shot a showreel for Madhuri and sent it to the directors.

Each of the three men would play a significant role in the legend that Madhuri became. But it was a fourth person, a woman, who would give form to the allure these men saw in the slim, young aspiring microbiologist. And predictably for Madhuri, it was a dance that made her a star. '*Ek Do Teen*', a song written by Javed Akhtar, is set almost at the beginning of N Chandra's gritty *Tezaab*. Composed in 20 minutes by Saroj Khan, it took

> "It's great to have fans in all age groups, whether mothers or kids, grandparents or grandchildren"
>
> Madhuri Dixit

A SCENE FROM *THE FAME GAME*

Madhuri 16 days of laborious rehearsal and seven days of shooting, including a continuous 24-hour shoot, to produce. For her, "It was like a classroom." She learnt how to dance for the camera with this song.

Energetic, vigorous, expressive, the song, shot in Mehboob Studios, transformed her into a star. The sweet smile combined with the heaving chest, the exaggerated swaying of the hips and the pelvic thrusts created a new kind of heroine who could subsume the function of the vamp. The big hair, the glittery costume, the elaborate stage were usually elements of the vamp's repertoire. But Madhuri brought to it a charming innocence which was all Saroj's doing. Writing in February 1989, film critic Madhu Jain called the film the dark horse of 1988 and ascribed much of its success to the song which is "driving people crazy. Ek do teen, they hum from the shower to the office, from the office to the bedroom and everywhere else in between."

The dance marked a turning point in the history of Hindi film dance for several reasons, writes gender and sexuality scholar Paromita Vohra. For the first time, it presented a clear heroine figure in a dance that is chiefly sexy, and presented sexiness with a robust, bodily series of steps. From this film on, a Madhuri Dixit film meant there had to be a Madhuri Dixit dance item in the film. The songs were full of double meanings and suggestions, as well as winks and teasing steps: '*Humko, Aaj Kal Hai Intezar*' in *Sailaab* (1990) with its Koli fisherwoman style; '*Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai*' in *Khalnayak* (1993) with its Rajasthani flavour; '*Chane Ke Khet Mein*' in *Anjaam* (1994) and '*Didi Tera Devar Deewana*' in *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* with their Uttar Pradesh folk roots—all of these featured much heaving of breasts, sticking out of bottoms and sinuous hip movements. Saroj also developed the signature step, which was repeated along with the refrain of the song, and through which cinema culture became physical culture, allowing those watching to imitate the dancing bodies, says Vohra.

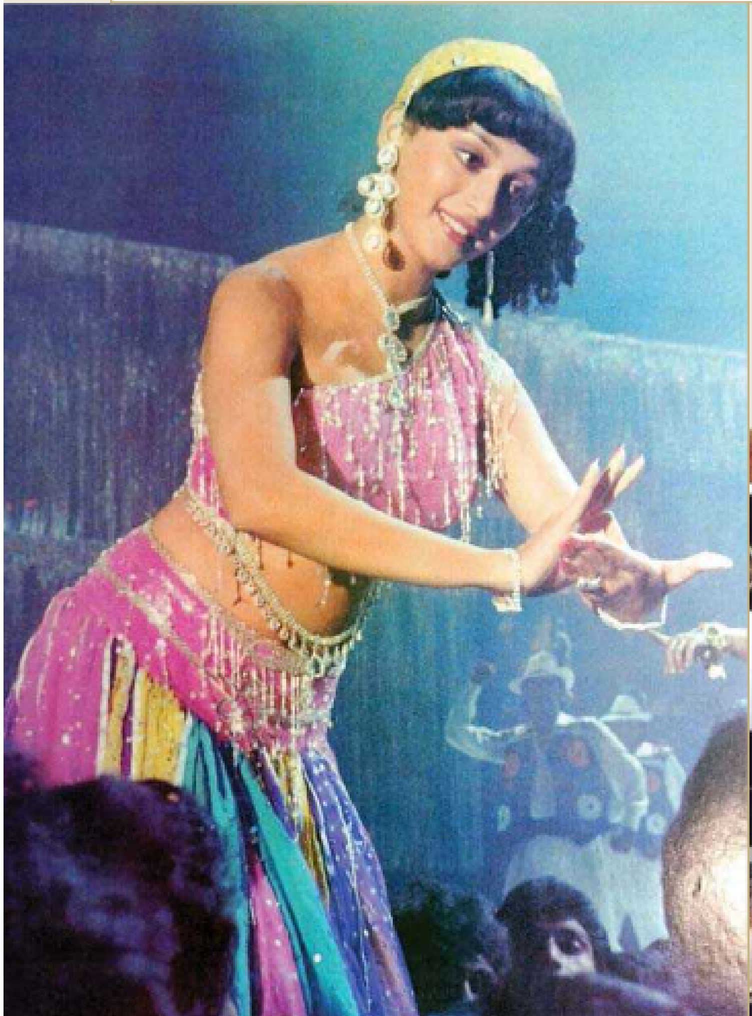
Saroj was as focused on Madhuri's face as her body. Though she had never been classically trained, Saroj had understood the fundamentals of Kathak and Bharatnatyam over her years as a group dancer and assistant choreographer. She poured all her learning into '*Ek Do Teen*' and into Madhuri. She introduced sensuality, distinct from vulgarity, in the traditional Bollywood dance, skirting the line between pure classicism and cinematic extravagance. Saroj didn't just dance with her body, she danced with her soul. And she made Madhuri a star. Madhuri recalls the time: "Every producer wanted me to do a dance number in his or her film...We were shooting a song for *Tridev*. There were three actresses. Sonam was a bigger star and so, she was made to stand in the centre. But as soon as '*Ek Do Teen*' became a hit, the producer changed our positions. I was in the centre."

Her frequent co-star from that era, Anil Kapoor, with whom she shared the once powerful Rakesh Nath, says he doesn't want to take any credit for her career. "She has made it on her own, with the support of her wonderful, dignified and simple parents; she's gifted and a born actress who blossomed into a big star but she will always be a daughter, wife, mother, and a dear friend. A fabulous dancer with a million-dollar smile." Their friendship has endured since 1985, even when she married cardiac surgeon Dr Shriram Nene in 1999, went to Gainesville, Florida, and then Denver, Colorado, and lived in the US for 12 years before moving back. It has weathered storms, including rumours of discomfort caused by Madhuri's rivalry with the other great female star of the era, Sridevi, who eventually and controversially married Boney Kapoor in 1996. Madhuri shared the throne with Sridevi for a while and then came the blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* that made her the nation's sweetheart. By 1994, she had toppled Sridevi from her No 1 position and was on the cover of practically every magazine with her radiant smile.

It is difficult to imagine how many hearts Madhuri broke when she married cardiac surgeon Dr Nene, whom she was introduced to by her brother in the US. Deepika Padukone once laughingly recounted in an interview how her father, badminton star Prakash, locked himself in the bathroom to mourn her marriage. Madhuri's reversal of fortune coincided with the arrival of women who had won global beauty events. By the late 1990s the definition of 'beauty' had changed forever and had paved the way for a different kind of heroine who fit the requirements of a more international kind of screen presence, points out Viswamohan.

Madhuri's ethnicity had a lot to do with her rise, says veteran film critic Maithili Rao. Maharashtra had waited a long time for a Marathi *mulgi* (girl) to rule the industry as its prime diva, says Rao. "After Nutan, an accomplished ac-

THE MANY LIVES OF MADHURI DIXIT



THE DANCING QUEEN, Tezaab, 1988
Composed in 20 minutes by Saroj Khan, '*Ek Do Teen*' in N Chandra's *Tezaab* took Madhuri 16 days of laborious rehearsal and seven days of shooting, including a continuous 24-hour shoot, to produce. It transformed Madhuri into a star

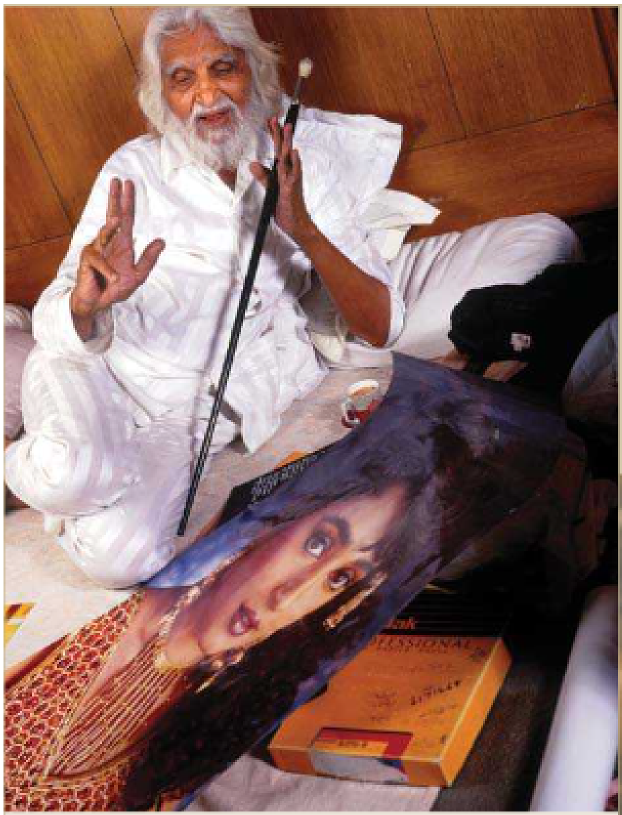
THE GIRL NEXTDOOR, Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!, 1994
Everyone's favourite daughter, Madhuri played Nisha, combining docility with a sparkle of mischief. Willing to accept the family decision and marry her bereaved brother-in-law and be mother to her nephew, she was ready to sacrifice her love for her late *didi*'s *devar*

> “I had a hairdresser, a make-up artist, and my mom. Now we have a social media team and so many teams that follow us. Now you need a whole village to create a star”
>
> **Madhuri Dixit**

tor with gravitas, there was a palpable underlying angst that none of their own rose to be the reigning queen in the city of dreams,” says Rao. Madhuri is perhaps the best dancer we have had, with her natural grace, infectious joie de vivre and intuitive ability to make the erotic acceptable. ‘*Choli Ke Peeche*’ in *Khalnayak* is the most famous (infamous?) example of cinema as the most powerful tool to empower the male gaze. Sanjay Dutt’s eyepatch emphasised visual pleasure that catered to male fantasy. Its risqué lyrics and celebration of rustic raunch outraged many puritans but Madhuri’s shapely shoulders shrugged off any charge of obscenity, notes Rao.

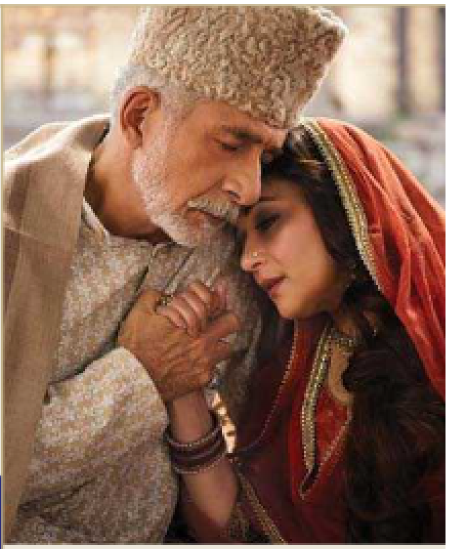
Despite ‘*Ek Do Teen*’ and ‘*Choli Ke Peeche*’ being synonymous with her rise to fame, the Madhuri paradox cast her in the image of the good *beti-bahu* imbued with family values. “Nisha of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* is everyone’s favourite daughter, who combined docility with a sparkle of mischief. Willing to accept the family decision and marry her bereaved brother-in-law and be mother to her nephew, she was ready to sacrifice her love for her late Didi’s *devar* whom she teased and flirted with under their collective noses. Traditional families are blind. Of course, the family dog and devoted retainer save the day for the sacrificial pair of docile lambs but the point underlined is willingness to obey elders,” says Rao.

Similarly, she says Saraswati of *Beta*, in time, became the template of the *bahu* who righted wrongs done to her simpleton husband and taught the wicked step-*sasuma* a lesson for life. This story of a determined, intelligent *bahu* restoring the right patriarchal order has been a favourite trope of popular literature and



MF HUSAIN’S MUSE, 2000
The late artist saw *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* 67 times and iconised Madhuri in the manner of an Indian Marianne. A series of paintings and a movie, *Gaja Gamini*, and Madhuri’s legend was complete

THE COMEBACK GIRL, 2007
Diya, a single mother, returns to small-town India to revive the *naach-gana* troupe left behind by her guru. Written by Jaideep Sahni and directed by Anil Mehta, *Aaja Nachle* was an old-fashioned song-and-dance spectacle, with a talented ensemble cast stretching from Irrfan Khan to Konkona Sen Sharma. It showcased Madhuri’s now regal splendour and reminded us why we missed the Denver-based actress

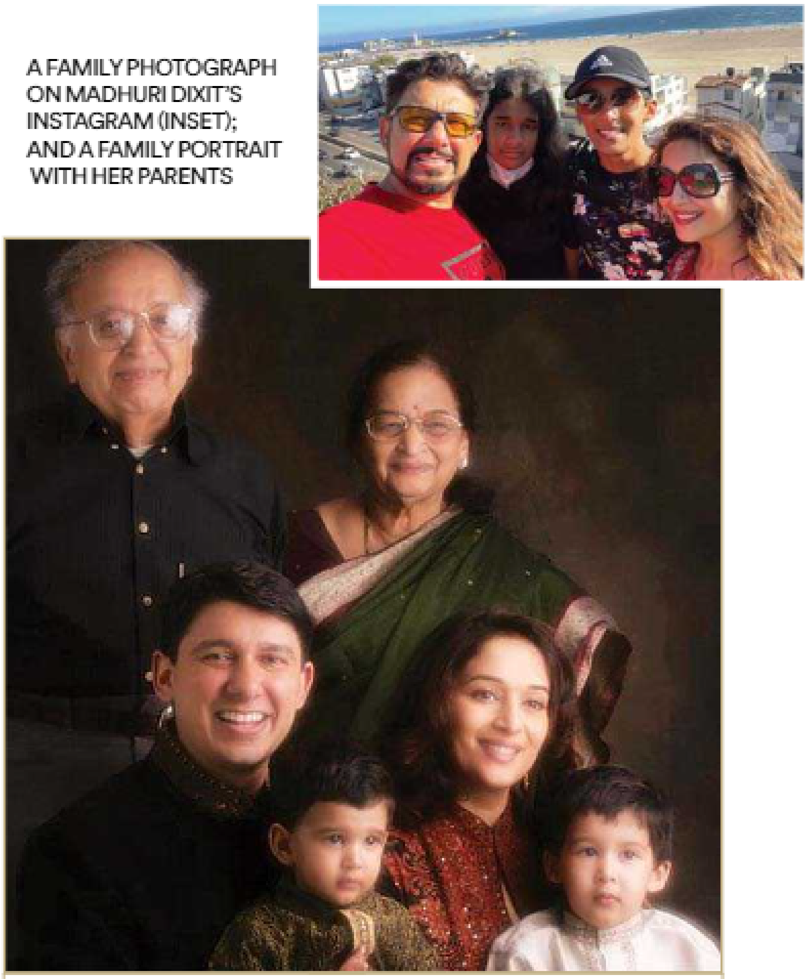


THE GODDESS GLOWS, 2014
Madhuri plays Begum Para, a disciple of Birju Maharaj in small-town UP, smoulders every time she comes onscreen, felling Khalujaan (Naseeruddin Shah), Jaan Muhammad (Vijay Raaz) and Muniya (Huma Qureshi) in Abhishek Chaubey’s Indo-Western. The 1990s little girl had finally grown up and become the woman every woman wanted to be

films. Saraswati is not the coy bride of earlier films. *Beta* rechristened Madhuri as the *dhak dhak* girl where she seduces the innocent husband with her heaving breasts and alluring smile, creating her own path to justice. Madhuri is the feminine strong woman who uses her Mohini avatar with discretion.

And yet the 1990s' women often dressed like girls, perhaps to match the men, who were boys. Remember Madhuri in *Dil*, with her long dresses, which can only be described as Barbie frocks, and the big hair? Madhuri grew up, but the Khan boys didn't, moving on to ever younger heroines in an effort to remain evergreen. It was a time when women were girls on the set too, with the ever present Mummy. Madhuri, too, was accompanied everywhere by her mother, even to parties where the men and women were segregated. One actress of the era remembers attending parties where the men drank in one room while the women sat, usually with their mummies, talking desultorily in another room.

Unlike Anamika Anand, Madhuri was never forced into the film industry. She chose to make it hers because she loved the work. "Whatever I did was because I wanted to," she says. She is the gold standard for heroines, the perfect balance of wholesome goodness and secret sensuality, of little-girl innocence and womanly wiles, of perfect professionalism and easy warmth. Jaideep Sahni, who wrote her comeback vehicle, *Aaja Nachle* (2007), where she played a 40-something divorcee with a young daughter who returns from the US to her village to revive her guru's theatrical troupe, says working with her is the same as Shah Rukh Khan. "It spoils you for life. They are just such consummate professionals." Abhishek Chaubey, who helmed *Dedh Ishqiya*, says it was a breeze working with her: "She has a gentle and sweet vibe and you forget that you are in the company of a superstar until the camera comes on and her immense talent speaks for itself."



A FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH ON MADHURI DIXIT'S INSTAGRAM (INSET); AND A FAMILY PORTRAIT WITH HER PARENTS

> "I've grown up in a very sheltered environment. My mom has always stood by me. Anamika Anand is completely the opposite"
>
> Madhuri Dixit

But she isn't all sweetness and light. She has no time for excessive flattery. Incompetence irritates her too. "If everyone in this world did what they were supposed to do, wouldn't it be a wonderful place?" she asks. Anger is not a totally unfamiliar emotion to her, but it takes some doing she says to get her really upset: "I'm a calm and patient person by nature."

Madhuri loves the freshness of the streaming series. As she says: "'It's not just that Anamika is based in the film industry but it's her relationship with her family. Her mother, her husband. That was fascinating to me because I've grown up in a very different, sheltered environment. My mom has always stood by me. Anamika Anand is completely the opposite. She did things because her mother was so domineering and now that she has everything, she doesn't want to lose it. She's clinging to it."

Madhuri's father ran a workshop making switchboard control panels and handled her finances, while her mother, a trained classical vocalist, was always there to support her, to pep her up when she was down: "I always had her. But there was no one else to guide us. I was just fortunate to get good directors and good roles," she says. Madhuri the actor has been through some rough times. There were no vanity vans to retreat to, there were rarely air conditioners, the shifts were long, and sometimes there were two in a day, and there was no entourage to protect the star. "I had a hairdresser, a make-up artist, and my mom and sometimes my manager would drop in to see, '*Sab theek chal raha hai na?*' That's it. Now we have a social media team and so many teams that follow us wherever we go because that is the world we live in right now. I don't see anything wrong in it because everything matters now. What you're doing on social media, what you're doing on the set, how you look, what you're wearing. Now you need a whole village to create a star."

What's new is also the number of women on the set. "When I began the only women on set were me, my mum, my female co-stars and the hairdressers. That's it (remember even make-up artists were a male preserve until 2014 when Charu Khurana took the matter to the Supreme Court). But today, when I walk on to a set, there are female assistant directors, directors, cinematographers, there's a woman in every department. Writers, photographers, it's so heartening to see them making a mark," she says.

Madhuri seems remarkably sanguine about ageing. "It's great to have fans in all age groups," she says, "whether it's mothers or kids, grandparents or grandchildren." She's a mom first and last. "Fame is great but your kids are your legacy finally. You'll always be protective of them. You'll always love them and you'll always stand up for them and give your life for them. That's what Anamika is as well, a tigress who wants to protect her children at all costs but who also loves them for who they are, unlike her mother (played by Suhasini Mulay) who wanted her to be a particular way."

The time away from India gave her perspective. "I chose to do that. I met Ram and decided this is the man I want to marry and I did. It was something I had dreamt for myself, having a house, a husband, kids. It was a big part of my dream for myself," she says. First they lived in Gainesville for two years, and then in Denver for 10. "Coming back was also an eventuality. My parents were getting old, I thought it'd be great to have the boys (Arin, 19, and Ryan, 17) grow up in India. Culturally, it was much richer for them," she says. "They learnt the tabla, the piano; it was great to give them the art and culture that we have. Coming back was a great journey; I started working again. It was not planned, just organic." She talks about her supportive husband, her mother-in-law especially who is a career woman herself (she's a real estate agent). "My mom is a classical vocalist so I always had the art in me. I had this support system. Whenever I think of other women, I do hope they have this kind of family behind them," she adds.

> "HER HOMEGROWN BEAUTY, DANCING SKILLS AND THE GIRL-NEXT-DOOR CHARM MADE THE AUDIENCE RELATE TO HER BIG TIME. SHE COULD EFFORTLESSLY BE A GLAM DOLL AND A SIMPLE MIDDLE-CLASS GIRL"
>
> **Aysha Viswamohan**
> film scholar

> "SHE HAS A GENTLE AND SWEET VIBE AND YOU FORGET THAT YOU ARE IN THE COMPANY OF A SUPERSTAR UNTIL THE CAMERA COMES ON"
>
> **Abhishek Chaubey**
> director, *Dedh Ishqiya*

Madhuri doesn't regret returning to India. Her children got pampered by their grandparents Aji and Azoba; they had cousins to mingle with. "They got to know their people, so they had a good time," she says. Her husband is happy too—he always had a connection with India. He used to visit his grandparents in Dadar when he was little. Their online academy, Dance With Madhuri, which he manages now, has taken off, and both are passionate about it. "Accessibility to good gurus is limited. There is a time and cost constraint. But at Dance With Madhuri, you can come and learn dance at your convenience from the privacy of your home. It is in 199 countries, we have an audience everywhere. We have a community of artists who can converse with each other. I wish Anamika had done that," she says.

When she's not Anamika, she is with her boys, talking to them, sharing something with them, or she is with her husband—"Either we're going out or hiking or skiing." "I have this new thing," she says, "I want to learn tennis because I love the sport. I've watched Billie Jean King, Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova, Steffi Graf over the years. There's always something new to learn."

And that is the secret to her enduring appeal. At the heart of the goddess is a diligent, dutiful and dedicated student.■

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Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

GUILTY OR GULLIBLE?

A compromised National Stock Exchange and its top executive who broke every rule in the book

By RAJEEV DESHPANDE

Within the National Stock Exchange (NSE), former managing director (MD) and CEO Chitra Ramkrishna's reliance on a mysterious 'yogi' in running the prestigious bourse, with a market capitalisation of ₹2,00,00,000 crore, was a poorly kept secret. As income tax authorities and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) pursue fresh leads on scandalous events that go back to 2013, the spotlight has fallen on how a nonentity of a middle-level manager suddenly became a key strategist and a so-called guru's emailed instructions decided promotions, postings and even pay hikes at the exchange.

The NSE saga hit the headlines after a Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) order severely indicted the top brass at NSE for failing to stop a series of bizarre actions that not only amounted to poor oversight and serious misgovernance but also pointed to the leak of sensitive market-related information over a period of several years till Ramkrishna and Anand Subramanian, the official she elevated to group operating officer (GOO) and advisor, quit the exchange in late 2016.

People familiar with NSE's functioning say that talk of Ramkrishna relying on a guru to guide her affairs was discussed even before she was elevated as MD and CEO. At the time, she was seen as a success story, one of the original team that joined NSE at its inception in the early 1990s as part of a project to set up a modern, automated market platform in tune with new financial instruments and screen-based trading technologies. Her appointment also drew attention as the rare woman executive to breach a glass ceiling at one of the world's biggest and busiest exchanges. The turn of events saw the exchange being exposed to ridicule and calls for an overhaul of NSE have only grown louder as details of the extraordinary saga emerge.

A central aspect of what happened at NSE revolves around a "*siddha purusha* (elevated soul)" who, according to Ramkrishna, did not have a physical presence and could materialise at will. This entity communicated through an email id (*rigyajursama@outlook.com*) and the SEBI order has several extracts of mails exchanged with Ramkrishna where she asks the 'swami' for instructions which are provided at some length. In her response to the notice served by SEBI, the former CEO said she had met the person referred to some 20 years ago on the banks of the Ganga (exact location unspecified) and received guidance on personal and professional matters not unlike the manner in which modern-day business leaders consult executive coaches. She said she would not know if the person shared information discussed with her with any other entity or person and denied that the guru could be anyone connected with NSE.

The third cog in the wheel is Subramanian, who was an ordinary middle manager at Balmer Lawrie till he landed a coveted job at NSE that took his salary from about ₹15 lakh a year to ₹1.68 crore as a consultant required to work four days a week. This soon became ₹4.21 crore with Subramanian, as noted by the SEBI order, achieving such salience that just about everyone reported to him. "As per the organizational chart depicting the reportees of Noticee no. 6 (Subramanian), as submitted by NSE vide email dated April 10, 2018, various functional heads viz. Chief People Officer, Chief Marketing Officer & CSR, Strategic Business Head-C&D, CBO-Current & Derivatives, CTO-Projects, CTO-Operations, CEOs-subsidiaries, Business Head-Int. & FII Interface, etc. were reporting to Noticee no. 6," the SEBI report says. This was quite a coup for someone with no experience in capital markets and with a thin CV that did not include any hint that he might be qualified to be the main strategic mind at an exchange as big and sophisticated as NSE.

But Subramanian had powerful forces batting for him. He was not only hired without the position of chief strategic advisor being advertised but there were no details of his interview on any human resources (HR) file either. His 'interview' was conducted by Ramkrishna alone, and soon he came to wield extraordinary influence on her and the affairs at NSE. There are conflicting versions that cloud his appointment. In her response to NSE, Ramkrishna said that Subramanian's name was suggested by HR personnel Rajjapa, who "used to introduce good resources" from time to time. In her submissions to SEBI, she has said Subramanian was recommended by an HR consultant but there is no record in the NSE files on the appointment. At the same time, Subramanian's wife, Sunitha Anand, worked at the exchange. "I knew [Subramanian] through his wife, who was an employee of NSE and my good friend," Ramkrishna told the SEBI inquiry. The emergence and selection of Subramanian for a top post at the bourse does not seem coincidental and CBI is pursuing the possibility of a larger conspiracy to provide illegal access to financial information and functioning of the exchange as the breach might well have serious implications for the integrity of the exchange and its products that are traded by millions of individual and institutional investors.

THE SELECTION OF SUBRAMANIAN FOR A TOP POST DOES NOT SEEM COINCIDENTAL AND CBI IS PURSUING THE POSSIBILITY OF A LARGER CONSPIRACY TO PROVIDE ILLEGAL ACCESS TO FINANCIAL INFORMATION

The career and responsibilities of Subramanian were a key part of Ramkrishna's communication with her alleged spiritual advisor who seemed to take a lively interest in the official's career, going so far as to state that if he were to take the form of a person then Kanchan (a reference to Subramanian) would be the closest representation. "NSE vide email dated June 12, 2019 it is noted that 10 emails were exchanged during the period from February 17, 2015 to February 19, 2015 (i.e. before the re-designation of Noticee no. 6 as 'Group Operating Officer and advisor to MD') between the Noticee no. 1 (Ramkrishna) and the unknown person having email id as rigyajursama@outlook.com which carried discussions, inter alia over new designation of Noticee no. 6 without making it as KMP," the SEBI order states. The discussion on ensuring Subramanian was not designated as a key management person (KMP) despite having a role on par with top directors at NSE is important. It was clearly intended to ensure that his re-designation as GOO and advisor to MD was not vetted. Given his role and responsibilities, NRC approval would be required. It is surprising that the chain of events unfolded without any intervention from other top NSE officials, including former MD Ravi Narain, who was appointed vice chairman in a non-executive capacity after Ramkrishna's elevation, and then chief regulatory officer (CRO) VR Narasimhan. They were clearly aware of Ramkrishna's extraordinary communication with her guru and even when a decision was taken to ask Subramanian to go—after public exposure of the case and mounting ridicule—proceedings of the board were not recorded on grounds of 'sensitivity' and information was provided to SEBI only after repeated reminders. "Thus, SEBI examination found that Noticee no. 2 (NSE) and its board were aware of such grave irregularities and misconduct on the part of Noticee no. 1 (Ramkrishna) on appointment of Noticee no. 6 (Subramanian), in the NRC and board meeting of Noticee no. 2 held on October 21, 2016 but did not record the aforesaid matter in the minutes of meeting on October 21, 2016 in the name of confidentiality and sensitive information and submitted the report on above irregularities to SEBI only after repeated reminders," SEBI said.

The identity of the 'guru' and author of the emails guiding Ramkrishna is a matter of speculation with guesses ranging from politicians to former senior government officials. The explanation might be more prosaic, though not bereft of intrigue. A forensic audit of Subramanian's emails and computer by Ernst & Young for NSE concluded the email id was being used by none other than him. After considering the matter, the SEBI order has also reached a similar assessment.

"NSE vide its letter dated November 27, 2018 has submitted that its legal advisors had consulted practitioners dealing with human psychology. As per the opinion of human psychology expert the noticee (Ramkrishna) has been exploited by Noticee no. 6 by creating another identity in the form of Mr. Rigyajursama to guide her to perform her duties according to his wish. The Noticee no. 1 was manipulated by the same man in the form of different identities: one as Noticee no. 6 who enjoyed her trust and other as Mr. Rigyajursama who had her devotion and dependence," the SEBI report states. The proof of any identity can only be provided by

THE SAGA

HOW SENSITIVE INFORMATION WAS LEAKED AND NSE APPOINTMENTS WERE MANIPULATED

» SEBI issued its showcause notice to **Chitra Ramkrishna, Anand Subramanian** and NSE on October 9, 2019

» **Chitra Ramkrishna** was MD and CEO of NSE from April 1, 2013 till December 2, 2016

» **Ravi Narain** was MD and CEO from April 1994 till April 2013. Thereafter, he was non-executive vice chairman on the NSE board till June 2017

» **VR Narasimhan** as chief regulatory officer (CRO) failed to raise red flags

» **Anand Subramanian** was chief strategic advisor from April 1, 2013. Re-designated as group operating officer and advisor to **Ramkrishna** from April 1, 2015 to October 21, 2016

» SEBI received complaints dated December 15, 2015; May 25, 2016; and November 11, 2016, alleging governance issues in the appointment of **Subramanian**. No HR documentation, no relevant experience in finance. Direct posting as consultant to MD, unequal pay of more than **₹4 crore**

» **Subramanian** was directly inducted by **Ramkrishna** despite having no capital markets exposure. He was a middle-ranking employee at Balmer Lawrie with an annual salary of about **₹15 lakh**. MD was totally dependent on him

» SEBI wrote to NSE on February 19, May 24, May 27 and June 30, 2016 asking whether **Subramanian** had been designated key management person and his appointment complied with rules

» **Narasimhan** as CRO denied any violation of rules in emails on March 14 and June 30, 2016

» On September 15, 2016, SEBI asked the matter be discussed by the NSE board

» After repeated reminders, NSE on November 29, 2017 sent a report dated November 22. It said the only person who interviewed **Subramanian** was **Ramkrishna**. No notings in the personnel file of **Subramanian** in relation to the interview. Neither was post of chief strategic advisor advertised nor any other person considered

» Report silent on how **Subramanian** was appointed on a salary of **₹1.68 crore** when he was drawing only **₹15 lakh** per year in previous jobs and how he was promoted and his salary hiked to **₹4.2 crore**

WHAT THE SEBI INQUIRY COVERING THE 2013-16 PERIOD FOUND

» In an internal note, **Ramkrishna** (then JMD) on January 18, 2013 said Subramanian had around 23 years in industry with "well-rounded exposure" in strategy/business development/new product development/legal/people management and general administration

» His consultation contract of five years and six months notice period was the highest; NSE rules clearly said consultants should be professionals with relevant experience

» **Subramanian**'s tenure as strategic advisor and **Ramkrishna**'s term as CEO began on the same date: April 1, 2013

» Between January 2013 and April 2017, **Subramanian**'s salary was raised five times

» Though only a 'consultant', substantial powers were delegated to him but he was not designated a '**key management person**'

» Auditor raised objections to **Subramanian**'s appointment twice in 2015

» **Ramkrishna** shared internal confidential information on organisation structure, dividend scenario, financial results, etc with an "**unknown person**" later said to be a "**yogi**"

» NSE submitted a detailed reply, including a forensic audit by E&Y, in four emails in 2018 to SEBI which concluded the unknown entity was none other than **Subramanian**

» Minutes regarding the NSE board's decision to ask **Subramanian** to step down in October 2016 are not on record and SEBI was not informed of his exit. NSE and its board were aware of **Ramkrishna** sharing sensitive information with an unknown person

» NSE board allowed **Ramkrishna** to resign despite her "bizarre conduct" and "grave irregularities"

» As CRO, **Narasimhan** kept ignoring concerns raised by auditor and forwarded responses framed by the HR department, apparently guided by **Ramkrishna**

» SEBI found responses of NSE and **Ramkrishna** a bid to trivialise offences as mere violation of employee regulations rather than affecting the world's largest derivative exchange with a **51 per cent** public shareholding

Ramkrishna or surface in the course of CBI investigations as the agency is presently questioning current and former top officials.

The benefits showered on Subramanian as a result of the persistent interest of the alleged guru with a near-total hold on Ramkrishna reinforces the suspicion that the NSE's assessment of the identity of the email writer may well be correct. Did Subramanian have a role in the creation of the email identity since he was well aware of Ramkrishna's reverence for her guru? And could this mean that there is another person who answers to the description of an alleged guru and who is not Subramanian? In her response to SEBI's queries, Ramkrishna said: "I met Him for the first time on the banks of the Ganges nearly 20 years ago directly. Subsequently, over the years I have taken his guidance on many personal and professional matters. Along the way, since He would manifest at will and I did not have any locational co-ordinates I requested Him for a way in which I could seek His guidance whenever I felt the need. Accordingly, He gave me an id on which I could send my requests."

The SEBI order strongly questions the former CEO's claim that the yogi-guru did not have a physical manifestation, noting that Ramkrishna's responses indicate she met the unidentified person on more than one occasion in 2015. In her statement to SEBI on April 14, 2018, she admitted to having met the 'unknown' person at a temple in Delhi. Further emails indicate a plan to travel to Seychelles and, more specifically, Ramkrishna's office fixed a meeting in Delhi on March 8, 2015, a Sunday. The 'yogi' speaks of being on an India visit and an office at Vasant Vihar. The exact link between the guru and Subramanian and whether the former NSE official played on Ramkrishna's dependence on a "*siddha purusha*" remains a matter of investigation.

It is ironic that an exchange that came up as an effort to provide a transparent and modern trading platform after insider scandals plagued the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) should find itself in such a mess. Among the founders of NSE is the current MD and CEO of BSE, Ashish Chauhan, who played a key role in developing modern financial derivatives, the Nifty Index and financial certifications, and whose exit from the exchange in 2000 is remarked on for the succession of average leaders. The current developments have turned attention to the "co-location" scam which was investigated in 2018. The essence of the scam, exposed by a whistleblower, was the access provided to a certain set of people fractionally in advance of being available to other traders and broking houses. The advance information led to estimates of massive illegal profits for the concerned traders and entities on a daily basis. The investigation exposed major loopholes in the NSE processes exploited by a former finance ministry consultant, Ajay Shah, who faced fraud charges. A company promoted by his sister-in-law, Sunita Thomas, also faced the flack. Thomas is married to a senior NSE official, Suprabhat Lala, who finds mention in the promotions and transfers recommended by the 'guru' to Ramkrishna via

INTERVIEW M DAMODARAN former chairman SEBI

'Only a Thorough Extent of Fraud

MELEVEETIL DAMODARAN, former chairman of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI), is known for his brevity, wit and often tit-for-tat responses. He is also sceptical about certain journalistic preoccupations which, according to him, include confusing facts and opinion. As the National Stock Exchange (NSE), once revered for its good governance, battles a scandal about sharing of confidential information with an outsider, involving its former CEO and her alleged 'Himalayan guru', the former head of India's market regulator dwells on the issue. The septuagenarian dismisses reports that he had to leave SEBI for being strict with NSE officials, such as Chitra Ramkrishna and others, about their transgressions. Kerala-born Damodaran, now chairman of IndiGo, director of multiple company boards and a corporate advisor, adds that the ongoing controversy is unlikely to significantly impact investor confidence because a new leadership is at the helm of the country's largest stock exchange which is also the world's biggest derivatives exchange in terms of the number of contracts traded

By ULLEKH NP

Do you think SEBI, India's market regulator, has been a bit lax about its investigation into who actually is this '*siddha purusha*' of Chitra Ramkrishna? Do you think this Himalayan spiritual guru is a fictitious character? Also, should the regulator hand over the job to other agencies?

The focus of SEBI's investigation cannot be expected to be establishing the identity of the '*siddha purusha*'. SEBI's order has proceeded on the basis that information has been passed on to an outsider, whether that outsider is a yogi or an ordinary mortal. Your use of the word "other" would seem to indicate that SEBI is an investigative agency. It is not. According to newspaper reports, investigative agencies are on the job.

SEBI was armed with new powers after the Harshad Mehta scam in 1992. Do you think this incident demands bestowing more powers on SEBI?

This 'incident' does not call for giving SEBI more powers. The existing powers are adequate for SEBI to discharge its duties.

What kind of specific confidential information do you think

Probe Can Establish the and the Role of Outsiders'

was passed on by former NSE Managing Director and CEO Ramkrishna and her team to people who were not supposed to receive them?
The SEBI order indicates the nature of information that was passed on to the 'outsider'.

How culpable is the NSE board in this scandal? What kind of changes need to be made on the board to ensure that such incidents do not happen again? Also, how do you react to the board keeping SEBI in the dark while letting Ramkrishna "exit through resignation" on December 2, 2016 and still praising her for her "sterling contribution to the growth of organisation"?
The board's responsibility is "superintendence, direction and control". Clearly, all of this is not in evidence in the instant case. The board's primary responsibility is to prevent wrongdoing by management. If this responsibility is properly discharged, there might be nothing to report to SEBI, except for violations of regulations.

GETTY IMAGES

Do you think all of this is a case of mere corporate governance failure at NSE? Or is it far beyond that, involving bigger players outside?
These are at one level corporate governance violations. Only an investigation will conclusively establish the nature and extent of the fraud, if any, and the role, if any, of outsiders.

How important is NSE, according to you, for investors in India?
NSE is not just another systemically important institution. It is a very important player in the country's economic ecosystem.

Less than 1.5 per cent of Indians invest in stock markets compared with close to 30 per cent in the US and more than 10 per cent in China. Do you think incidents such as these will further affect credibility and therefore trigger greater hesitation on the part of potential investors?
I do not believe that these developments will significantly impact investor confidence. Investors look to the institution and not any individual. They are aware that there is new leadership at the exchange and some improvements/changes have been given effect to.

NSE's former Group Operating Officer Anand Subramanian was promoted to the position by Ramkrishna for his "resourcefulness" and "ability to grasp new ideas" although he had no prior experience in capital markets, according to the SEBI report. Your comments?
I have no information other than the SEBI order (not a report, as journalists have repeatedly referred to it).

***The Hindu Business Line* reports that some time prior to 2008, two SEBI officials who had gone to NSE after brokers made complaints that they had problems in receiving price feeds from NSE and BSE were locked up in the NSE office. You acted swiftly to free them. You read NSE the riot act. And then, soon after, you had to leave SEBI. Why was NSE seen as beyond reproach? Or was there more to your exit than met the eye?**
My leaving SEBI was not related to any incident. I served my three-year term (February 18, 2005 to February 18, 2008) and left on its completion. I was eligible for another term, but eligibility is not entitlement.

You had been critical of journalists often when you were SEBI chairman. Yet journalists have earned the credit for unearthing irregularities at NSE and have even won favourable court verdicts in the past. Are you still sceptical of business journalists?
I continue to be critical of journalists who confuse fact and opinion. Journalism is an excellent profession, but some of its practitioners do it no credit. As for irregularities at NSE, two journalists (one of them a respected longstanding commentator and author) exposed what went on. I hope, one day, sooner rather than later, many more will do enough to persuade me to revisit my scepticism. ■

emails. Questions have been raised if warning signals during the co-location scam, which played out between 2010 and 2015, were ignored. Former officials feel that the concerned bureaucrats at the finance ministry could have done a better job and a leaf could have been drawn from the action taken in the case of the commodities future scam that hit the MCX following which the founder of the exchange, Jignesh Shah, had to quit. A change of management and merger of the discredited NSEL and parent Financial Technologies were some of the key measures proposed by then forward markets chairman Ramesh Abhisekh. The SEBI order renewed focus on the hacking of NSE servers to deliver a huge advantage to a select few like OPG Securities. The process of recovery of fines and other penalties in the case continues to be subject to legal proceedings. There is a view that a 'deep cleaning' of NSE might be needed to ensure transparency in the exchange's functioning, particularly with regard to controversies about the technology infrastructure, as well as to bring about full accountability for the 2013-17 period. The exchange has, however, done well under the current leadership, having recorded a massive growth in derivatives trading.

THE IDENTITY OF THE AUTHOR OF THE EMAILS GUIDING RAMKRISHNA IS A MATTER OF SPECULATION. A FORENSIC AUDIT OF SUBRAMANIAN'S EMAILS AND COMPUTER CONCLUDED THE EMAIL ID WAS BEING USED BY NONE OTHER THAN HIM

Meanwhile, recent events have served to highlight the consequences of a weak and inefficient board being unable, and even unwilling, to set right the affairs at NSE. The leeway enjoyed by Ramkrishna can be estimated by the exchange's IT unit being directed to allow her emails to be delivered to the *rigyajursama@outlook.com* id despite the internal alert system blocking the mails due to the detection of key trip words like "equity", "IPO" and "markets". The email that did not go through—and led to the 'guru' complaining to Ramkrishna that her mails to him were being blocked—was one dealing with NSE's five-year projection sheet. Incredible as it may sound, email access to the suspicious id was restored and sensitive information continued to flow to the entity. The story of a compromised board and the motives of the top executive who broke almost every rule in the book will remain incomplete until the motives of the cast of characters are fully revealed. Was Ramkrishna a victim of a 'spell' cast by a consummate charlatan or did she know more? And given the nature of information that was leaked, who were the beneficiaries? The credibility of NSE's functioning will rest on the answers. ■

ALL THE C

ANAND SUBRAMANIAN

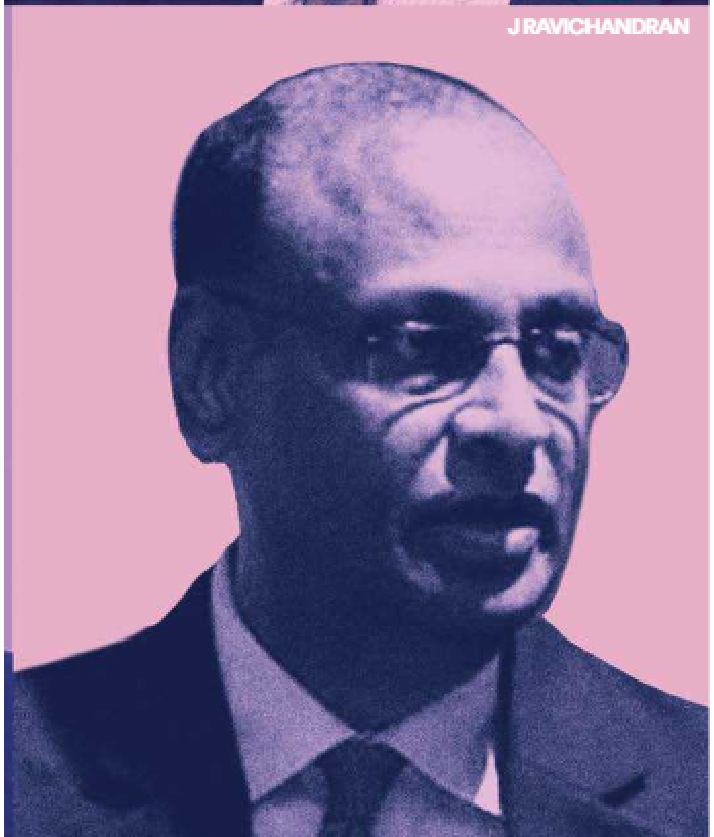
VR NARASIMHAN

EO'S MEN

Four characters in a play scripted by an unseen hand

By AMITA SHAH

RAVI NARAIN



J RAVICHANDRAN

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

The curious case of Chitra Ramkrishna's faith in a '*siddha purusha*' has brought under the scanner four men—Anand Subramanian, Ravi Narain, VR Narasimhan and J Ravichandran. While Subramanian rose to become group operating officer (GOO) at the National Stock Exchange (NSE) from advisory consultant in just two years, former CEO Ravi Narain and former Chief Regulatory Officer VR Narasimhan have been accused of watching his 'arbitrary' appointment and promotion silently. Ravichandran, the group president and company secretary of NSE, was accused of ignoring concerns raised by the secretarial auditor on the appointment of Subramanian as GOO and advisor to the managing director (MD) without the approval of the Nomination and Remuneration Committee (NRC) and the board, but the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) absolved him of these charges on the ground that he had forwarded the concerns to Ramkrishna and human resources. Subramanian, as per the SEBI order, has been barred from associating with any market infrastructure institution or any intermediary registered with SEBI for three years, and Narain for two years. The two have been penalised with a ₹2 crore penalty per head.

ANAND SUBRAMANIAN

His role as consultant at NSE had evoked suspicion in several quarters that he could be the mysterious 'Himalayan yogi' who Chitra Ramkrishna claims had been advising her as her spiritual guru for two decades. Brought into NSE by Ramkrishna, who was the only person who interviewed him, he went on to become GOO within two years after he was appointed advisory consultant with effect from April 2013. "Mr Subramanian brings with him 21 years of rich experience and expertise in various fields and will facilitate advise in the areas as required from time to time from the office of MD and CEO [sic]," the announcement on his appointment had said. Ramkrishna was then MD and CEO of NSE. It did not specify how his previous experience would be relevant at NSE.

The SEBI order traces the meteoric rise of Subramanian, known as Subbu. Before joining NSE, he was VP Leasing & Repair Services of Transafe Services Limited, a subsidiary of Balmer Lawrie, earning an annual salary of ₹14.75 lakh. His salary rose over 11 times at NSE at the time of appointment. He was offered ₹1.68 crore a year for working as a consultant for four days a week. In a year, the amount was increased to ₹2.016 crore per annum. Subramanian, who reported directly to the CEO and was evaluated by her, was given the highest rating of A+. In March 2015, he was given a 15 per cent raise, taking his annual salary up to ₹3.3 crore and designated as GOO and advisor to MD. He was never designated as a key management person (KMP), a move that would have required the approval of NRC. Subramanian went on overseas trips and made frequent visits to Chennai although he was officially based out of Mumbai. His wife Sunitha, who was with NSE's regional office in Chennai, was made consultant at ₹60 lakh a year from April 2013, the same time when Subramanian took charge as advisory consultant.

"Pretty soon, it was clear that the advisory consultant was effectively the Number 2 in the organisation. Chitra would not clear any decisions unless they were routed through Subbu. She ensured that nobody had any doubts about his position by giving him an office on the same floor as hers. There was only one other office on that floor, which was for the visiting chairman or vice-chairman and it had access to a reserved elevator," write Sucheta Dalal and Debashis Basu in their 2021 book *Absolute Power: Inside story of the National Stock Exchange's amazing success, leading to hubris, regulatory capture and algo scam.*

The yogi theory brought him in the eye of the storm. Ramkrishna told SEBI in April 2018 that the identity of the email id holder *rigyajursama@outlook.com* is the "Siddha Purusha", a Paramahansa who may be largely dwelling in the Himalayas. Apparently, the yogi, whom Ramkrishna said she often sought guidance from on various matters, held Subramanian in high regard. The NRC report, however, noted in November 2017 that there was no evidence to provide any basis for Subramanian's performance evaluation as A+.

APPARENTLY, THE HIMALAYAN YOGI HELD SUBRAMANIAN IN HIGH REGARD. THE NRC REPORT, HOWEVER, NOTED IN NOVEMBER 2017 THAT THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE TO PROVIDE ANY BASIS FOR HIS PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AS A+

His exit from NSE was dramatic. Dinesh Kanabar, the then chairman of NRC, was investigating his recruitment. Dalal and Basu write: "Kanabar was very clear how it would be done. Chitra was called in and told that 'he (Subbu) has to go right now'. She was asked to leave the room right away, inform him that he had to go, take charge of his computer and access cards, etc, escort him out of the building and report back to the board in 15 minutes. There was no question of any argument, time or compromise on the matter; and she complied. Subbu also had to vacate his apartment that very day. Subbu's wife continued with NSE until December, when she was also eased out."

In February 2020, SEBI issued a showcause notice to NSE over the appointment and promotion of Anand Subramanian. He has, recently, been questioned by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) over three days in light of the SEBI order.

RAVI NARAIN

Ramkrishna's senior at the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI), Ravi Narain was brought in along with her as part of former IDBI Director RH Patil's team in 1992 when NSE was set up. Articulate and suave, Narain, a Wharton School MBA and Cambridge-trained economist, had a deep understanding of the financial sector. Under Patil, he is known to have played a key role in the growth of NSE in stock and debt markets as it took on the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE). He took over from Patil as MD and CEO in 2001 and 11 years later, two years before his term was to end, decided to step down, much to everyone's surprise. This allowed his protégé Ramkrishna to take charge. He, however, stayed on the NSE board in a non-executive position, as vice chairman and shareholder director. Both decisions—Ramkrishna's appointment and his becoming vice chairman—were taken by a four-member selection committee, of which Narain himself was a member.

With Ramkrishna bringing in Subramanian, the power equations soon changed. The advisory consultant was allotted Narain's former apartment at the top floor of NEAT House in Mumbai. Narain's role was conspicuous by his silence. He spoke out against neither the way Subramanian was appointed and promoted nor Ramkrishna's correspondence with an unknown person. The SEBI order said that despite having knowledge of "such grave irregularities and misconduct" and knowing that Ramkrishna "has not applied her independent judgment and was dependent on the guidance of an unknown person" while taking important decisions, Narain allowed her to exit through resignation and, at the board meeting held in December 2016, allowed her excess leave encashment of ₹1.54 crore.

His own position as shareholder director and public interest director (PID) had been questioned. In their book, Dalal and Basu write that Narain and Chandrasekhar Bhaskar Bhave, who were among the few with experience of capital market regulation and heading significant market infrastructure intermediaries, were sounded out by then Union Finance Minister P Chidambaram in 2004 for the SEBI chairman's job. But both turned it down because it would entail sharp pay cuts and they had children studying abroad. "Over the next three years, Bhave at NSDL and Ravi at the NSE enjoyed huge pay increases on par with the best in the private sector. They also operated like heads of government institutions and exerted a lot of power over the regulator, while not being subject to any external scrutiny, vigilance, restrictions or even the RTI Act, like government entities."

NARAIN SPOKE OUT AGAINST NEITHER SUBRAMANIAN'S APPOINTMENT NOR CHITRA RAMKRISHNA'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH AN UNKNOWN PERSON. SEBI SAID THAT, DESPITE HAVING KNOWLEDGE, NARAIN ALLOWED RAMKRISHNA TO EXIT

They also point out that NSE launched algo trading without SEBI's specific approval when Narain was MD. When the algo scam broke, Narain was the non-executive vice chairman and on all important committees of the board—the audit committee, nominations and remuneration committee, stakeholder relationship committee as well as the risk assessment and review committee. He was also a director at many of the companies NSE had floated.

When Patil died in 2012, Narain, in an article, wrote: "I have learned a lot from this mild mannered and soft gentleman. Retain the courage of your conviction, struggle for what you believe is right, empower your people and give them space to grow, and at all times, invest in your institution. All of us at NSE and in the financial markets will miss him." But, five years later, he quit after SEBI issued the first set of showcause notices, facing allegations that he had been a silent spectator to actions that may have been far from what was right. Besides Ramkrishna and Subramanian, he too has been questioned by CBI in the alleged abuse of the colocation facility by an NSE stockbroker.

VR NARASIMHAN

The former chief regulatory officer and compliance officer at NSE had claimed before SEBI that there was no violation in Securities Contracts (Regulation) (Stock Exchanges and Clearing Corporations), or SECC regulations, 2012 in Subramanian's appointment. He was fined ₹6 lakh for furnishing "incorrect and misleading submission". The SEBI order noted that Narasimhan was aware of the powers delegated to Subramanian who attended board meetings and reported only to the MD and CEO and performed all functions of a KMP and not just a consultant. He, however, turned a blind eye to it. A KMP required his or her hiring to be cleared by NRC and the board. The SEBI order said Narasimhan had failed to exercise due diligence in the performance of his duties.

Narasimhan, who retired from NSE in 2018, submitted that various other departments including the HR department and the regulatory department lacked autonomy while dealing with their respective departments and were compelled to work only as per the direct instructions of the MD and CEO. This was seen as admission of failure in performing his duty as compliance officer. The order said he had failed to report to SEBI the non-compliance of SECC regulations.

He began his career as a lecturer at a commerce degree college in Hyderabad and then moved into a long stint in the financial sector. After retiring from NSE, he went on to become the dean of the National Institute of Securities Markets (NISM), SEBI's own educational initiative. He was still working there when SEBI was conducting its investigation and issued showcause notices to him and five others in December 2019.

J RAVICHANDRAN

The group president and company secretary of NSE, J Ravichandran was issued a showcause notice over allegations that he had ignored repeated concerns raised by the secretarial auditor on the appointment of Subramanian as GOO and advisor to MD without the approval of NRC and the board. Subramanian was appointed GOO at a grade on par with his. The same day, Ravichandran was promoted to "Group President—F&A, CSR and Corporate General Counsel in addition to being company secretary", recognising the "value and experience, in terms of his concerted efforts and engagement with all our stakeholders" over a period of time.

Ravichandran submitted that he became aware of Subramanian's re-designation when Ramkrishna issued a mail on March 2, 2015 to NSE employees stating that with effect from April 1, 2015, Subramanian would be GOO and would handle People Management, New Business, Corporate Communication, Marketing, Business Excellence, Research and Development, Pricing, Strategic Planning and Subsidiaries. The email did not contain information on the position of GOO, persons reporting to him, whether Subramanian would handle those functions in his advisory consultant capacity or in administrative or executive capacity and if he would continue to be a part-time consultant or become full-time or an employee after the re-designation. Further, he pointed out that it was the MD and CEO who was responsible for all matters pertaining to Subramanian, assisted by the HR department.

The SEBI order rejected the allegations against Ravichandran of suppression of irregularities on Subramanian's appointment saying he had forwarded the concerns of the auditors to Ramkrishna and Chandrasekhar Mukherjee, the chief people officer at NSE. Mukherjee had said that Subramanian was not a KMP and his appointment did not require the approval of NRC and his engagement was within the administrative powers of the MD and CEO. It also concluded that the allegations did not hold because by the time the secretarial auditor rejected the reply of HR through its letter in October 2016, the issue was already placed and discussed by NRC in its meeting. When Ramkrishna stepped down, Ravichandran was given interim charge. ■

THE SPELL OF A NA

Is the NSE scandal a case of blind faith or a collective

When Richard Alpert left Harvard University for the Himalayas, he was looking for a guru who could teach him the ancient secrets of attaining self-realisation. Steve Jobs, too, had left for India to look for the guru, Neem Karoli Baba. But unlike Jobs, Alpert found him, became his disciple and decided to share that ancient secret he learnt with the world and changed his name to Baba Ram Dass.

Himalayan yogis influencing Harvard professors and global CEOs are not a new phenomenon. Now, closer home, we have a former CEO who claims that she was carrying out important organisational decisions by consulting a Himalayan yogi. This got my attention because, in 2016, my firm had done a leadership assessment centre for the senior leaders of the National Stock Exchange (NSE) and I had the opportunity to meet her a couple of times. My impression of Chitra Ramkrishna then can be summed up as a mix of the following adjectives: sharp, elegant, soft-spoken, confident and strong.

Can highly educated, smart and rational people blindly follow or obey a guru or a yogi? Enough incidents in the past say yes. The Beatles came to India to meet Mahesh Yogi who promised them that he could teach them how to levitate. Remember TN Seshan, the brilliant Chief Election Commissioner, who tried to bring some order to the running of elections in our country? He wore a ring embedded with stones which was given to him by Sri Sathya Sai Baba who, reportedly, had produced "it from thin air". So, CEOs and senior leaders, like many other Indians, despite all their commitment to corporate governance rules, could have blind faith in an ideology or a person that might have no rational meaning.

But there is a difference in this case. Those yogis I mentioned—Neem Karoli Baba, Mahesh Yogi, Sai Baba—were all guiding millions of people, offering them solace. But Ramkrishna seemed to have a personal yogi just for herself and Anand Subramanian, her colleague. And this yogi likes vacations on exotic beaches where he can probably mix work and pleasure. He understands the complex workings of financial institutions and the government and wants his identity to remain a secret. Other yogis did not mind a bit of spotlight falling on them. The yogi who writes an email like "Kanchan will evaluate as per MY will. Don't worry the straw knows when to be a capillary and when NOT to. Kanchan is the straw and I will be the suction force for this" could also be a narcissist. Narcissists are known to use a sense of self-confidence and assurance to portray a personality that is attractive to a confident, successful woman. Ramkrishna was confident and successful.

CEOs and senior leaders are as vulnerable as all of us to have their blind spots, psychological disorders, temptations, fears and insecurities. "Show me a sane man, I will cure him for you," renowned psychologist Carl Jung had said. Again, while Seshan's professional actions were aimed at cleaning up the election management system, Ramkrishna's actions possibly show how corrupt the system is.

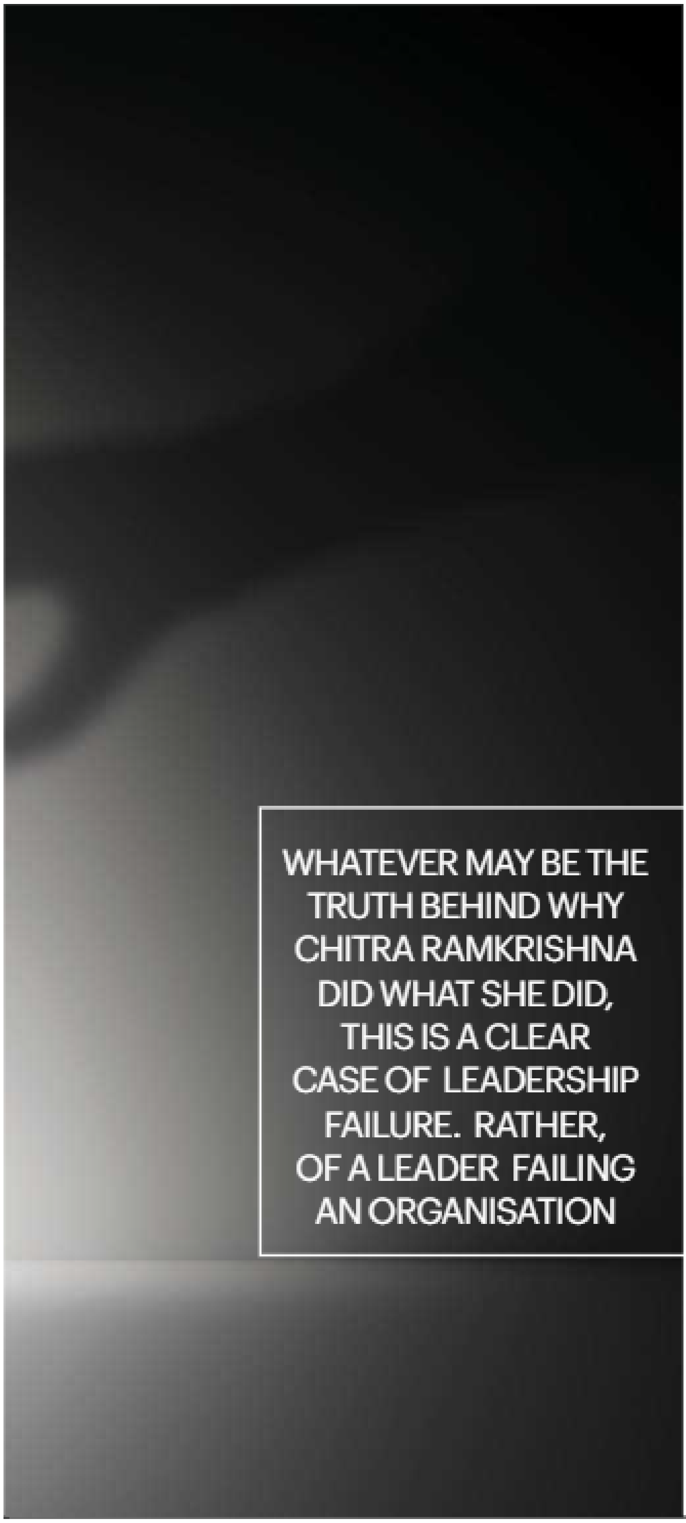
To me, whatever may be the truth behind why Chitra Ramkrishna

Illustration by **SAURABH SINGH**

RCISSIST

conspiracy?

By SANTHOSH BABU



WHATEVER MAY BE THE TRUTH BEHIND WHY CHITRA RAMKRISHNA DID WHAT SHE DID, THIS IS A CLEAR CASE OF LEADERSHIP FAILURE. RATHER, OF A LEADER FAILING AN ORGANISATION

did what she did, this is a clear case of leadership failure. Rather, of a leader failing an organisation. In the recent past, many leaders like the Theranos CEO, the erstwhile CEOs of Uber, WeWork, and the COO of Facebook have faced serious allegations against their conduct. This is extremely worrisome as the decisions senior leaders take in large organisations have a huge impact on their customers, employees and even countries.

While organisations and boards invest money in developing talent, enabling us to conduct leadership assessment of NSE leaders, CEOs usually do not undergo any developmental journey. And most leadership development initiatives anyway do not focus on 'being a leader' but instead focus on a set of skills or a body of knowledge. So, even if CEOs go through a developmental intervention, it may not address the real inner complex landscape of their minds.

"All senior leaders of Uber should go through leadership training and coaching," says the report by former US Attorney General Eric H Holder Jr, hired by Uber to address mounting criticism of the company amid a wave of workplace scandals a few years ago. This means, many boards do realise the importance of supporting a CEO from a psychological and leadership perspective. But in India, a CEO can always say that *I already have a coach, an invisible Himalayan yogi who guides me and tells me what to do including how to plait my hair*. Then there is no point in trying to provide a certified, professional coach. Because a coach never tells or advises but helps the leader discover why they do what they do.

In fact, providing a coach might not always work if the CEOs are not keen or unprepared to examine their inner world, their fears and hopes. There are cases where boards and CEOs understand the importance of supporting a CEO. "The advice that sticks out is the one I got from John Doerr (who was on the board of Google) who in 2001 said, my advice to you is to have a coach," said Eric Schmidt who was CEO and chairman of Google. I am currently a coach to the CEO of a large Indian financial sector firm and the board was involved in hiring me. So, in some cases, a developmental journey for the CEO would work.

What else can an organisation do to make sure that no single leader can consciously or unconsciously harm it? An organisation must build shared leadership across it, not just one supreme commander but many leaders who collectively take decisions. Has NSE created other leaders who are now heading senior positions in other organisations? When an organisation is centred on one single individual, others do not get visibility within and outside the organisation, thus failing to create a proper succession plan. One of the primary responsibilities of the CEO and the board is to create a proper succession plan and this is a true test of leadership. And clearly, NSE and Ramkrishna failed in doing this. ■

Santhosh Babu is an organisation development consultant and coach to CEOs

A BRIDGE TO ABU DHABI

The economic partnership agreement with UAE conveys India's openness to trade in an increasingly protectionist world

By SIDDHARTH SINGH

Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan conferring the 'Order of Zayed' on Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Abu Dhabi, August 24, 2019

IF THERE WERE a record for the free trade agreement (FTA) negotiated and signed in the shortest span of time, it would surely belong to the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Signed on February 18, the agreement took all of 88 days to be finalised and signed by the two sides. The agreement comes at a time when there is widespread pessimism about global trade. If anything, ever since the Covid-19 pandemic started, protectionism has been the rule and free trade an exception. The CEPA proudly signals that India is ready for business.

"This is truly a landmark partnership between the two nations whose people, whose political leadership and whose businesses share very strong bonds for many years in history," Piyush Goyal, the Union minister for commerce and industry, said a day after the agreement was signed. He added: "This CEPA is extremely beneficial for MSMEs, startups, farmers, traders and all sections of business and will give a big boost to the economies of the two countries." Goyal was at pains to emphasise that the CEPA was much more than an FTA.

The fact that the agreement was signed during a virtual summit between the leaders of the two countries—Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi—indicates that the CEPA is part of a much wider engagement between the two countries. India and the UAE had signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) during Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan's visit to India in 2017. At that time, the two countries had shown a keen interest in a CEPA.

On February 18, in his remarks during the virtual summit, Modi said, "This agreement reflects the deep friendship between the two countries, a common vision and trust. This agreement marks the start of a new economic era between our two countries and our trade in the next five years will go up from the present $60 billion to $100 billion."

UAE, UNLIKE CHINA, IS A VERY DIFFERENT COUNTRY. IT REPRESENTS GROWTH IN TRADE THAT IS FAIR AND EVENLY BALANCED. THE CEPA IS A SIGN OF MATURITY IN TIES

Under the agreement, a number of goods produced in India will attract zero tariff access in the UAE market. A number of Indian sectors—apparel, gems and jewellery, manufactured items, leather goods and more—will benefit from accessing this important market that serves as a point of entry to African, West Asian and European markets. In his remarks to the press a day after the agreement was signed, Goyal said that he expects up to 10 lakh jobs to be created as a result of the CEPA. Highlighting two sectors in particular (he had a list of nine), Goyal said that in textiles alone, industry associations expect exports to UAE to rise by $2 billion in the years ahead. But among the biggest prizes, the gems and jewellery sector's exports are expected to rise by a whopping $10 billion in years to come.

In the gems and jewellery sector, both countries stand to gain. If Indian-manufactured jewellery stands to gain then, in the case of UAE, India has agreed to tariff reductions in gold exports from that country. India has a virtually insatiable demand for gold. Last year, it imported 800 tonnes of the yellow metal. There have been years when gold alone has accounted for a substantial fraction of India's Current Account Deficit (CAD) and as such gold imports are a sensitive trade matter. Under the CEPA, India has agreed to a Tariff Rate Quota (TRQ) of 200 tonnes where the duty on imports from UAE will be 1 per cent less than what India charges for the rest of the world. In effect, UAE will have a tariff advantage of 1 per cent over all other countries on gold exports to India. If that threshold is breached, the duty will go up. Last year, India imported 70 tonnes of gold from UAE.

Trade agreements are a sensitive issue as very often there are domestic winners and losers from these agreements. In theory, free trade sounds like a pleasing prospect as cheaper imports give benefits to consumers. But the obverse is that these cheap imports also have the potential to hit domestic producers as well. Jobs, income, dependence on trade and much more are tangled. After the dominance of China in global trade—often through dubious means such as subsidies to its domestic producers—sustaining trade agreements requires trust between trading partners. Both Modi and Goyal were at pains to emphasise this aspect of the India-UAE relationship.

But even with trust—built up over a number of years—the CEPA has safeguards for both sides. These inbuilt features are necessary in today's complicated world. One example highlighted by the commerce minister was that of steel. Steel is one commodity that large producers like China have often 'dumped' on other countries where demand is high. But this does not help importing nations beyond a point: the domestic industry often gets depressed. In the CEPA, the two countries have agreed to a "melt and pour" clause that has been designed to prevent steel from third countries being dumped in the Indian market. Under this clause, steel has to be manufactured in UAE.

This requirement is part of the "country of origin" rules and safeguards built into the CEPA. To prevent other countries from inserting their products in the India-UAE trade, a 40 per cent value addition in the goods being exported to India will be necessary. This is a substantially high percentage of local UAE inputs for the purpose of safeguards. To give more teeth to this provision, the certification for this will be given by the UAE government and this will add to trust in this matter.

Another safeguard mechanism in the CEPA deals with a sudden surge of imports (in both countries). If that "unnatural" surge does take place, the two countries can undertake countervailing/anti-dumping duties as a remedy. When seen along with the strict country of origin rules and local value addition, the CEPA has plugged loopholes to prevent abuse of its generous provisions.

SAFEGUARDS ARE ONE thing but trade is always about two-way benefits between partners. One of the more innovative features of the CEPA is the Food Security Corridor Initiative. Under this, an MoU has been envisaged between APEDA, India's exports development authority for agricultural and food products, Al Dahra of UAE and DP World, the logistics management company there, to ensure UAE's food security. UAE is not a food-growing region and is dependent on imports of most items that it consumes. India produces practically all kinds of food items and is surplus in many of them. India's problem is one of finding export markets for items like rice, wheat and other foodstuffs. The CEPA offers one big opportunity for India's farmers and agricultural exporters to tap a big market.

Under the CEPA, India has also managed to open doors for its pharmaceutical products. If Indian products are approved by the regulatory authorities of countries like the US, UK, Australia and Japan, it will not have to seek the same approval again in UAE. This saves Indian manufacturers of approved goods a double bureaucratic gauntlet that involves massive compliance costs. This gives a boost to India's efforts to build itself as the "pharmacy of the world" and further the fortunes of its substantial pharmaceutical sector.

Piyush Goyal and Abdulla Bin Touq Al Marri in New Delhi, February 18, 2022

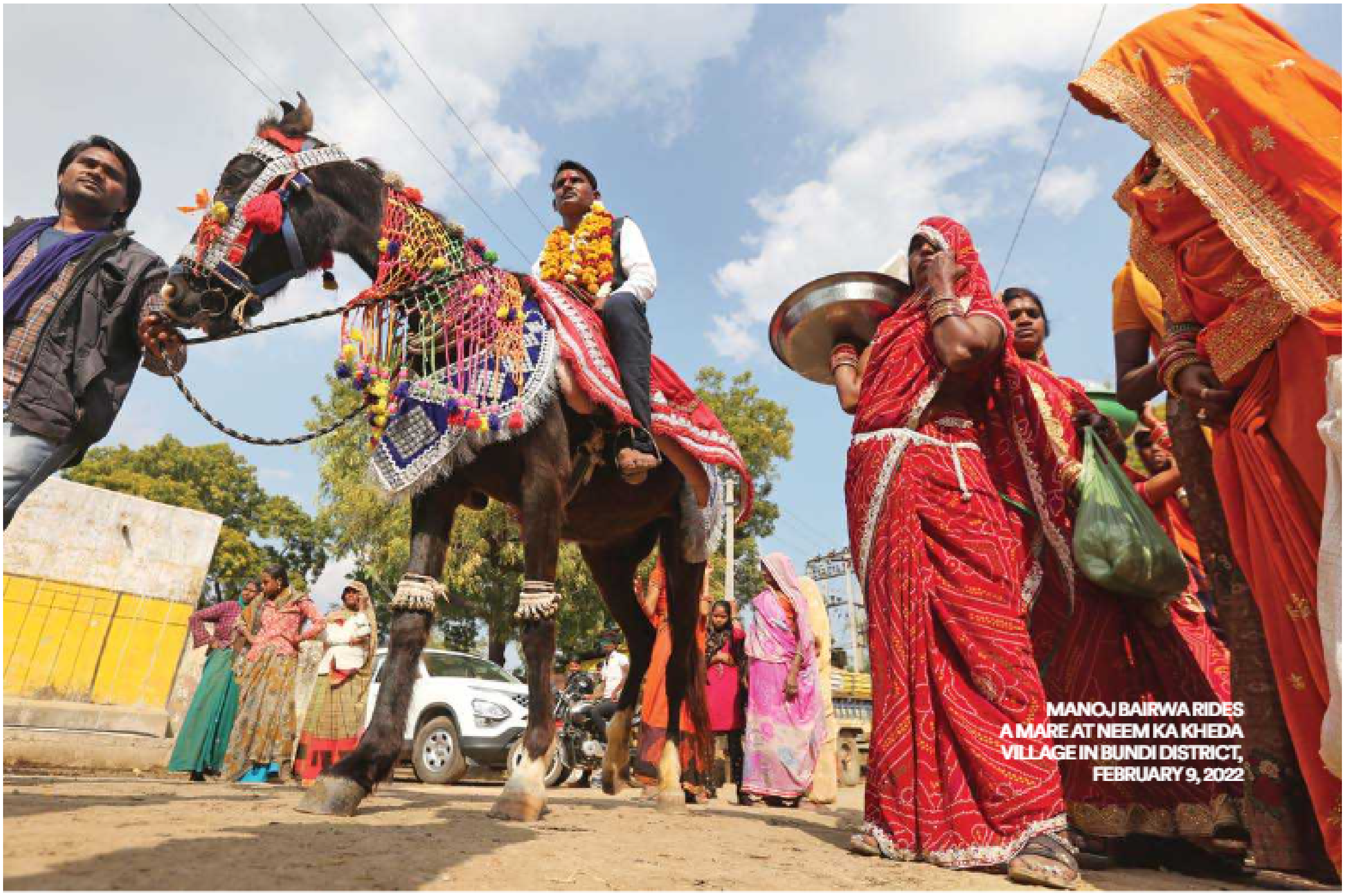
JOINT PRESS CON
New Delhi, ebruar

THE CEPA OFFERS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIA'S FARMERS TO TAP A BIG MARKET. INDIA HAS ALSO MANAGED TO OPEN DOORS FOR ITS PHARMACEUTICAL PRODUCTS

UAE is perhaps India's second most important trading partner given the nature of its trade, the composition of the export basket and the potential for balanced trade between the two countries. In 2017-18, two-way trade was $50 billion and in the next two years it rose to $60 billion per year. There was a dip during the pandemic years but, importantly, the two countries kept their supply chains open. UAE helped India with key medical supplies like liquid oxygen when many other countries had banned the export of key equipment and supplies. India's exports to UAE have also remained on an even keel. India routinely exports about $30 billion worth of goods and the pattern of trade is largely balanced. This is unlike India's other trading partners like China where imports are in multiples of India's exports. No amount of negotiation has helped to restore balance in trade. The result is a general souring of relations where India has been forced to take measures to safeguard its economic interests. UAE, in contrast, is a very different trading country that represents potential growth in trade that is fair and evenly balanced. The CEPA is a sign of maturity in ties.

IN HIS REMARKS after the CEPA was signed, Goyal said the FTA with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—the economic union comprising Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE—that has stalled since 2008 is also in the process of being negotiated at speed. Teams from India and GCC are near to finalising the terms of reference for a possible deal. Similarly, a 'mini-FTA' with Australia is also likely very soon. This deal will try to reap the 'low-hanging fruit' while keeping aside the more contentious trade issues. The mini-FTA with Australia is likely to include sectors such as pharmaceuticals, education, health, textiles, and gems and jewellery. Earlier this month, Goyal met his Australian counterpart Dan Tehan and the two agreed to "aggressive timelines" to complete the deal. A lot of bilateral trade between the two countries is already under the ambit of trade agreements and this is likely to go up even further with the mini-FTA. The contentious issues are largely in agriculture (for example, in the dairy sector) that provide livelihood to millions of small farmers in India who are unlikely to be able to compete with the scale of Australian agribusiness.

India's newfound aggressiveness on trade has a good economic rationale. After the pandemic hit the Indian economy, its mainstays like consumption and investment demand have come under sustained pressure. These are expected to normalise but with a substantial time lag. In contrast, trade has grown by leaps and bounds during this period. In his press conference in Mumbai on February 19, Goyal mentioned that by February 14, India's exports this year had crossed the $350 billion mark and are well on their way to achieving the highest ever export performance of $400 billion by the end of March. In this context, it makes sense for India to push trade as a source of economic growth pending the revival of other sources of growth. In a difficult economic situation, trade has been one bright spot. In April 2020-January 2021, exports amounted to $229 billion, a figure that leapt to $336 billion in April 2021-January 2022. It makes great sense to push trade in this situation. FTAs are one way to ensure that this growth continues in the years ahead. ■



MANOJ BAIRWA RIDES A MARE AT NEEM KA KHEDA VILLAGE IN BUNDI DISTRICT, FEBRUARY 9, 2022

Photographs by ASHISH SHARMA

KAREENA'S GROOM RIDES A MARE

A SMALL INTERVENTION BY THE POLICE HAS CHANGED AN UNWRITTEN CODE OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN A CORNER OF RAJASTHAN

By RAHUL PANDITA

AT THE ENTRANCE to his modest house, Manoj Bairwa stood in a new shirt and a waistcoat, his henna-painted nails gleaming in the afternoon sun. As local government officials and his relatives hovered around him, he stole glances at the mare standing with her handler nearby. For the occasion, she had been decked up in shiny red gear. In a few minutes, Manoj would have to get on her and take a round of the entire village. It was happening, finally. But Manoj, 24, who worked as a labourer just like his father, still couldn't believe it. "*Parivartan aa gaya*/Change has come," he whispered, as if he did not want anyone to hear it. The

IN THE NEEM KA KHEDA VILLAGE, THERE IS NO CASTE TENSION BUT THERE
FAMILY WILL DISTURB THE CODE OF THE *SAMAJ*. A DALIT

'*parivartan*' had occurred, but for the Bairwas and other Dalit households in the village, it was hard to believe.

In the Neem Ka Kheda village in Rajasthan's Bundi district, about 240 kilometres from the state capital Jaipur, the Bairwas are among a handful of Dalits living here for decades. It is a microcosm of Rajasthan itself, where Dalits constitute roughly 17 per cent of the population. Like elsewhere, the village has a majority of households from dominant castes. There is no caste tension, but there are unwritten rules. One of those is an acceptance that no Dalit family will disturb the code of the *samaj* (society). A Dalit man getting on a mare is one such violation, which has never happened, except once, 32 years ago. And when it did, it created trouble.

That was eight years before Manoj was born. Manoj's father has four siblings, including one sister, Kanyabai. In 1990, she was set to get married to one Ram Gopal, who came from a village 35 kms away. The Bairwas had no idea but Gopal had decided to come riding on a mare from the outskirts of their village. As soon as the villagers saw a Dalit man on the mare, he was pulled down and beaten up badly. Some perpetrators were arrested, resulting in bad blood, none of which Dalit families like the Bairwas can afford.

The incident broke the marriage. A humiliated Gopal could not come to terms with the beating, and somehow held his wife's family responsible for it. He returned to his village, leaving behind his wife.

"For 12 years, I waited for him to take me, but he never came," recalled Kanyabai, as she waited for her nephew to break the code that had cost her dearly. When Gopal did not return and take her, the Bairwa brothers found another man for their sister. A tailor by profession, Surajmal lives in a village 40 km away. "There was no function; I just came and we got married," he said. The couple now have five children.

The genesis of what Manoj was about to do lay in a development in the village four months earlier. In October, a young police officer, Jai Yadav, took over as the superintendent of police in Bundi. Shortly afterwards, he came across a news report of a Dalit man's inability to let the grooms of his three daughters arrive on mares to their weddings. Ganesh Lal Meghwal, who ran a provision store, about 500 metres from the Bairwas, urged his soon to be sons-in-law to not arrive on the back of mares. As Yadav investigated, he realised that no one in the village had actually asked him not to do it. "It is just that he remembered what had happened 32 years ago to his neighbour and decided to play it safe," said Yadav.

YADAV DECIDED TO change this. In the next few weeks, he led an intervention by starting a special operation to give confidence to Dalit households. The district police identified about 30 villages where such practices of discrimination had a societal acceptance. The police visited these villages and organised meetings with elders. "We told them that this was not done and that they would have to face the law if they persisted," said Yadav. In every village, committees were constituted which included, apart from a few village elders, the station house officer, beat constable, sarpanch, *patwari* and school principal.

Villagers around here are fairly fearful of what they call "*Dhara Teen*/Section 3" of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, in which there is provision for punishment for atrocities against a member of the SCs or STs. But that does not always prevent violence against them. In 2020, Rajasthan reported a spike in crime and atrocities against SCs and STs. It had the second highest number of cases of crime against STs. Police records say that in the last 10 years, 76 cases where Dalits were not allowed to ride a mare have been reported. But the actual number would be much higher. In November and December last year, at least two cases were reported from Jaipur district alone where wedding processions of Dalits with the groom on a mare were pelted with stones despite police presence.

This was not lost on Yadav. His team held several meetings, asking people to cooperate with changing customs and empowering Dalit families to celebrate their marriages like everyone else. "We made them stakeholders, telling them that now the entire future of the village was in their hands," Yadav said.

The first such wedding was solemnised on January 24 this year in Chadi village. In the next few days, emboldened by police presence, 14 other marriages took place where Dalit grooms rode on mares without any visible trouble.

On February 9, Manoj Bairwa's *bindori* function was organised in the village. It is a pre-wedding ritual where the groom (and even the bride) rides a mare in the form of a procession, stopping finally at the local temple for blessings. On that day, the SHO, Arvind Bharadwaj, landed up at Bairwa's house along with other policemen—all of them in plainclothes—to oversee arrangements. Shortly after noon, a pickup truck arrived, fitted with giant speakers in the rear, playing high-decibel popular Rajasthani songs. As it rolled like a juggernaut, women from the Bairwa household and a few others danced behind it. At the other end of the procession, a garlanded Manoj sat nervously on the mare, trying to keep his gaze straight. The procession first passed through the small market on the main road outside the village. Then it turned back and made a round of the entire village. At one point, Kanyabai, decked in her finest clothes, surged ahead and danced with others for a few minutes, emotionally touching her nephew's forehead several times.

From his shop, Ganesh Lal Meghwal looked on as the procession, now playing

ARE UNWRITTEN RULES. ONE OF THEM IS AN ACCEPTANCE THAT NO DALIT MAN GETTING ON A MARE IS ONE SUCH VIOLATION

MANOJ BAIRWA (EXTREME RIGHT) AND HIS FATHER

Daler Mehndi's '*Bolo ta ra ra ra*', passed by his house. Many families came to their rooftops, witnessing the procession from there. Towards the end, Yadav along with his deputies and other officials from the civil administration, also joined in. Upon spotting Meghwal's college-going son, Sitaram Meghwal, Yadav called him and told him that he also needed to get on a mare when the time came. Sitaram smiled and nodded.

Outside a flour mill, Rashilal Sharma and a few others watched silently as Bairwa's wedding party passed by. He was unhappy about it. "What can one do now that the *prashasan* [administration] has stepped in," he said. Sharma, it turned out, had a long list of complaints. The young people among upper castes were not getting jobs now, he felt. "Now that you have these people on top, this is what will happen," he said, looking in the direction of Manoj's *bindori* procession. Sharma said that the Bairwas should have resisted this change themselves. "*Mana karna chahiye tha*." They should have said no, just like the Meghwals, he said.

It is very unlikely now that those who are against it in the village, like Sharma, will resort to any unlawful action. For his part, Yadav says he will continue his meetings, this time involving even schoolchildren, so that such changes are everlasting. For now, he is aware that some older people like Sharma do not like this change. "Some are getting jittery; they must be even taunting younger men in their family that they have let this happen," he said. Referring to a term he had heard in a speech recently, he said that only such actions would result in "substantive equality".

There are already some other encouraging things happening. A Dalit man who was supposed to get married like Bairwa on February 10, had changed his profile picture on his WhatsApp account to the one in which he is seen on a mare's back. Below it his status message reads: "Meghwal King".

The police are now receiving applications from Dalit families from several villages across Bundi, asking for their assistance to perform *bindori* with dignity.

BUT SOME IN Neem Ka Kheda are nervous about this change, especially when they read about such changes being resisted in other parts. The night before Manoj took out his *bindori*, a similar procession in Jhalawar district was attacked with stones by five members belonging to a dominant caste. A family member of Manoj, who did not want to be named, said that many of his neighbours were not liking it. "They have agreed to it in public, but inside their hearts, they detest it," he said. Perhaps, this is what their neighbour Meghwal had in mind when he asked his three sons-in-law to not come on the mare. People of all communities buy grocery from his shop and there must have been an awareness that perhaps some would indulge in a social boycott of sorts if he rebelled against the age-old custom. His daughters are already married but the son's *bindori*, hopefully, will turn a new chapter in their life.

As Manoj's *bindori* procession came to an end, Yadav told villagers to uphold what they had started. "You have removed this stain of 32 years today. Your village has achieved freedom in its true sense," he said.

After a while, all officials and village elders were gone. Manoj now sat on a plastic chair with a few friends and relatives, a little dazed by all the attention he had received. The cameras and most journalists had left, too. Tomorrow, he would bring his bride home. He smiled upon being asked the woman's name who would become his wife the next day.

"Kareena," he said. Her parents, in a great act of hope, had named their daughter after the famous actor. But more than that perhaps, she will now be known as the bride whose groom rode a mare for the first time in Neem Ka Kheda. ■

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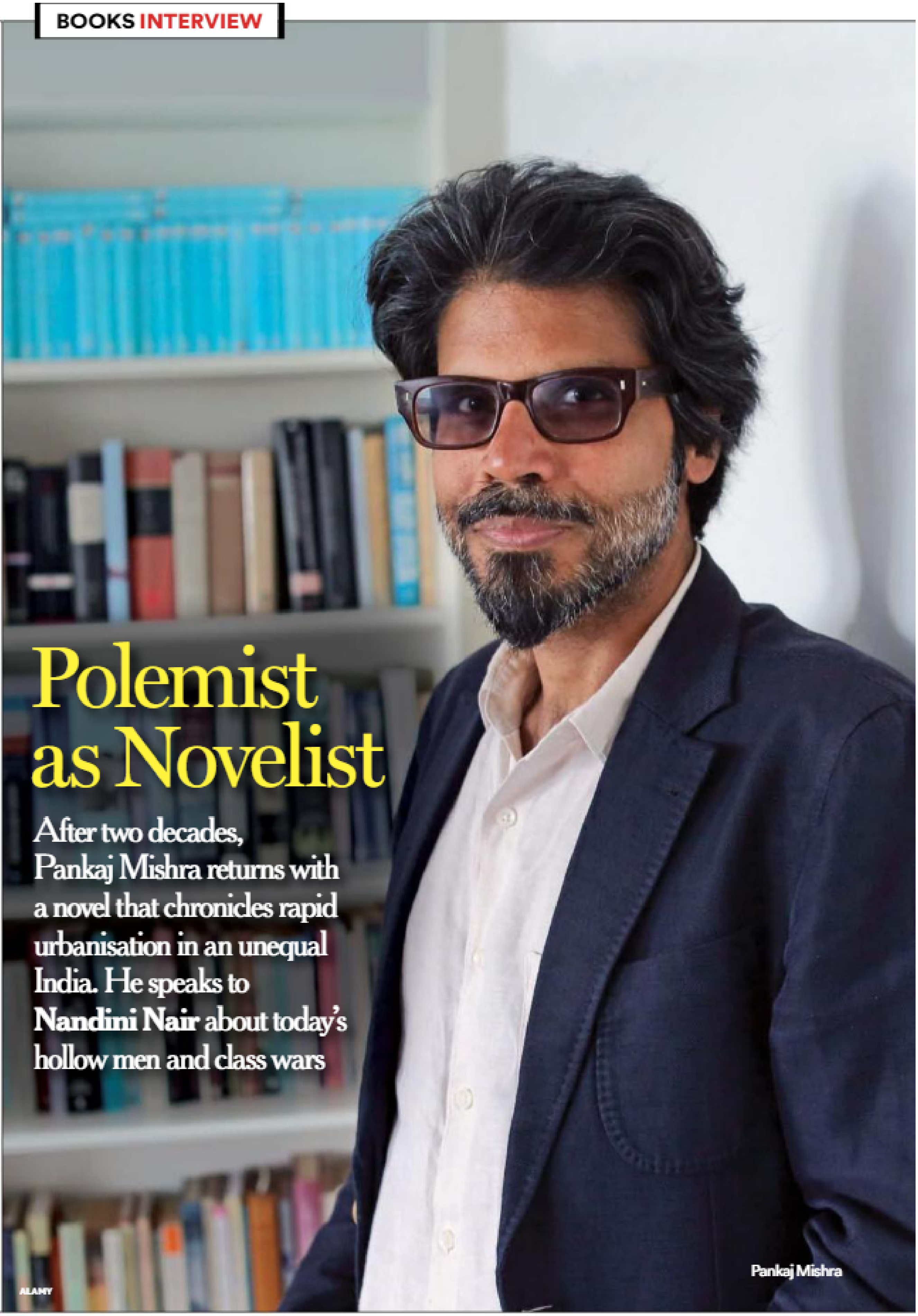


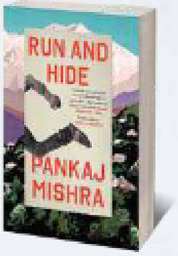
Polemist as Novelist

After two decades, Pankaj Mishra returns with a novel that chronicles rapid urbanisation in an unequal India. He speaks to **Nandini Nair** about today's hollow men and class wars

ALAMY

Pankaj Mishra

IN HIS NUMEROUS nonfiction books, Pankaj Mishra has captured the defining spirit of our present moment. Over the last two decades he has written books that tell of the churn in India and the West; liberalism and democracy, race and empire are his pet themes. As a prolific essayist, he is best known for his books *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia* (2012) and *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (2017). His writings always reveal clarity (though historians like Niall Ferguson would beg to differ) and comprehension, which blames "modernity for our age of anger". While Mishra might be known for his argumentative Indian persona, at heart he is a novelist. He enjoys tinkering with words as much as he likes Rubik's Cube-ing ideas, he is as much at home in the realm of imagination as he is in the arena of politics. His debut novel *The Romantics* (1999) tells of Samar, the young narrator who in Banaras, hopes to lose himself in books and solitude. A March 2000 review of *The Romantics* in *The New York Times* noted that "Mishra has created an affecting Bildungsroman while at the same time exploring the clash of cultures in contemporary India."



> "MY INTENTION BEHIND THIS BOOK IS TO GET AWAY FROM GENERALITIES AND TO EXPLORE WHAT IT MEANS FOR MEN OF A CERTAIN GENERATION, WHO HAVE COME FROM VERY MODEST BACKGROUNDS AND WHO SUDDENLY GAIN THESE INCREDIBLE WINDFALLS OF WEALTH AND POWER"

Run and Hide (Juggernaut; 336 pages; ₹599), Mishra's most recent novel, after more than two decades, chronicles a similar clash of cultures played out through the lives of three young men. Aseem, Virendra and Arun meet at IIT, but from there, their lives take different tangents. Arun, the narrator becomes a translator of Hindi novels. Virendra reaches great heights in the banking sector in America, and Aseem becomes a media icon and literature festival organiser.

It is difficult to write about *Run and Hide*, without giving too much away. But while reading it, the characters always seem familiar and unfamiliar. A reader conversant with the Indian context will certainly spot the spirits of Tarun Tejpal, Rajat Gupta and Preet Bharara flitting through pages. In the margins of one page, I write '*Succession* meets *Slumdog Millionaire*' because the book deals with the extremes of wealth and poverty. It is a novel of sharp observation but a bleak outlook, where one's humiliations of the past determine the course of one's life.

The book is at its strongest when Mishra, the novelist, shines through, it is on shakier ground when Mishra, the polemist, takes control. At those times the novel seems to be in the service of ideas rather than its characters. The reader might crave for an interlude of emotions rather than allegories. Through the lives of his characters, Mishra is telling the story of India's rapid urbanisation and how this has led to the creation of "hollow men" or, in the words of his nonfiction, "a global crisis of masculinity". The lives of the characters of *Run and Hide* illustrate liberalism's many failures, where the elite are left baffled about the realities of 'real' India.

Speaking from the English countryside, which is "not so nice, and very cold, and very overcast," Mishra discusses India's "daring generation", a separation from the past, and the various novels his book is in conversation with.

Excerpts from an interview:

If one was to identify a single theme of the novel it would be the global crisis of masculinity, a topic that you've dealt with in your nonfiction too. What is responsible for this crisis?

You have to look at it differently when you're writing nonfiction, and when you're writing fiction. The point of fiction is to get away from generality and generalisation to exploring the inner life. The judgemental mode that you fall into when you're doing nonfiction, and when you're talking about a crisis and are trying to determine what has led to this particular crisis—that's a very different mode of operating. Whereas what fiction does, is to present human beings and individuals in their most exposed forms, without any kind of support from ideology or ideas or notions, it shows them as they are. My intention behind this book is to get away from generalities and to explore what it means for men of a certain generation, who have come from very modest backgrounds and who suddenly gain these incredible windfalls of wealth and power. How do their souls deal with this enormous fortune? What happens to them? I wanted to explore how they then cope with their empowerment in the wider world?

Could you track your journey for us, from a novel to many years of nonfiction and now a novel again?

I started off actually as someone very much wanting to write novels. I published one novel that I'm still relatively happy with. And I was suddenly asked to do various long pieces of reportage. It allowed me to travel and it was quite enjoyable. It was also a way to make a living. And my own ability in it also grew. Before I knew it, 20 years had passed and I had only really written books of nonfiction, of reportage, of intellectual history, of travel and political history, and religious history. But all this time what I really wanted to do was to write fiction. Because I knew that the forms that I was working with—the essay or reportage or even the memoir, which is the most revealing, most autobiographical form of nonfiction—were not adequate. They were not somehow able to capture this very complex reality that I was talking about. So, at the end of every book, essay, or piece of long-form writing, I knew that there was a lot that had to be left out. Because that belongs to the realm of imagination, and also belongs to the realm of speculation. So, a whole lot of frustration really built up over the years and I did not cease wanting to go back to fiction. It was just a question of when exactly. Around 2018-2019, I felt ready to go back to it, I had a certain theme, some vaguely discerned characters that I could play with, and work them into my writing.

Which do you find more fulfilling?

Oh, definitely fiction. No question about it. I should also say challenging, and perhaps for that reason more fulfilling. Because with journalism, with any kind of nonfiction writing, you're working with a set of facts that have been already arrived at, either arrived at by you or by someone else. So, you already have a head start.

With fiction, you're just staring at a blank page. You just don't know where to begin. But at the same time, it also gives you this enormous freedom to break free of these very heavy facts, and you can enter the world of the imagination where you can do just about anything you want to. Obviously, you still are working within certain protocols. But at the same time, you do have a lot of freedom to imagine the inner lives of people. You have the freedom to imagine landscapes. You have the freedom to resurrect certain memories of yours, deploy them, utilise them differently in your fictional narrative. And those freedoms make fiction writing incredibly liberating and an exhilarating business.

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This novel is about the transition in the lives of the main characters. Towards the end, Arun says that he has a simple fear which is of having “lost a world”. Given the rural to urban migration we see in India, is it possible to belong to two worlds? Does one necessarily have to lose one to become part of the other one?

I'm glad you found that line to be saying something important, because I do think that's one of the more important lines in the book. They sum up an experience that many of us have had. Especially belonging to societies like India where development, progress, growth, all of that have come to mean uprooting yourself to a large extent, moving physically from one place to another, into different modes of living, and so our relationship with the past is much more fragile. For many of us in places like India and China and large parts of Asia and Africa, the movement is always away, and it's irrevocable, it's moving away from the past and often renouncing the past because renouncing the past is almost a guarantee of arriving at the future, the much-promised future of modernity, of fulfilment of modern life. Many of us suffer from this longing for a past that once existed and no longer does.

Building on that, the characters are seeking a “complete liberation from the life of their parents”. But having achieved that they are not any happier. By the end, Arun is in the throes of penance. Could we talk a bit about the risks of divorcing one's parents?

That's very sensitively put. There is this notion that we all—in some ways or some degree—subscribe to that you have to put the past behind you, and everything that belongs to the past, including friendships, relatives, parents. Because they don't quite go with your aspirations to the modern, to the metropolitan. I saw this growing up around me, where so many people were actually deeply ashamed of their parents, of the way they spoke English, or sometimes even of the way they spoke Hindi. These men created a barrier between them and the generation of their parents. Because of this whole process—at least what we've been promised is progress—you are constantly betraying aspects of your personality, aspects of your past. And that makes you lonelier and lonelier, even without you realising it. I see this in a lot of people, for instance who moved to the West, who are physically very remote from where they grew up and the people that they grew up with. And although they're living in splendid townhouses in Manhattan or in Los Angeles, there is something that is still gnawing away at them internally. It's nevertheless there, the feeling that you've not been fair to the things you grew up with.

The novel mentions how those in Delhi drawing rooms speak about ‘rising India’, but how that “exaltation is delusion”. Is this divide just becoming more apparent with time?

Over the years—and this is something people like us in the media don't talk about enough because we are very much complicit in this—is that a huge gap has opened up between the way in which people in the metropolis (and that includes people in the media obviously) conceive of themselves, conceive of their place in the world and the way ordinary people think of themselves in the world. So, the realities of smaller places, smaller cities, smaller towns, not to mention villages, they've become really obscure, they've become invisible because so much of public space was dominated by the concerns of people like you and I speaking in English, talking a language that is widely comprehended around the world, speaking not only between ourselves but speaking to foreign journalists, foreign reporters. And so, we all started to believe in this notion that India is rising and is doing well partly because we were also doing well. We were generalising from our own position, from the expanded opportunities we were all enjoying. But we've all seen—whether it's in the UK, US or in India—that what is true for us, a minority in metropolitan areas, or indeed a minority in smaller cities is not true for a lot of people. And if you persist in these illusions that India is shining or India is rising, you'll at some point be punished by people who don't believe any of this, whose own experiences are not confirmed by your ideas and who will turn against you and they will often turn to some outsider who promises to come in and show the metropolitan elites their place. And take revenge for all the humiliations and insults they've heaped on people in rural areas or semi-rural or semi-urban areas.

> “IF YOU PERSIST IN THESE ILLUSIONS THAT INDIA IS SHINING OR INDIA IS RISING, YOU'LL AT SOME POINT BE PUNISHED BY PEOPLE WHO DON'T BELIEVE ANY OF THIS, WHOSE OWN EXPERIENCES ARE NOT CONFIRMED BY YOUR IDEAS AND WHO WILL TURN AGAINST YOU”

Arun chooses to live in a Himalayan town called Ranipur. Which clearly seems inspired by Mashobra. A town you've lived in and written about. How central has Mashobra been to your imagination as an author?

Oh absolutely, central. To live in a village when India was embarking on this enormous experiment of economic liberalisation, my years exactly coincide with that. I moved there in '91-92, so I was able to observe everything that was happening in the village. I knew all the people who were stakeholders there. And it's really opened up a perspective that has proven to be extremely valuable in examining broader trends in India, and indeed the rest of the world. Everywhere we are now beginning to wake up to the fact that non-metropolitan areas, non-urban areas have become politically consequential because they were all for so long not taken into account by journalists, by economists. Wherever you look, whether it's the United States or the United Kingdom, or Brexit, what you see is this fatal divide between the metropolitan areas and the relatively impoverished areas out in the countryside.

I feel in retrospect so much of my writing was made possible by this close experience of another reality, which made me think that we cannot really buy into or subscribe to these wildly optimistic scenarios of India becoming a major economic power by 2020, and so on, and so forth. There were these other realities we had to take into accounts, and those were being systematically neglected by the media.

It is interesting how Aseem says, “Maybe the difference between Hindu crazies is not so great after all, because ambition and vanity have probably made us more alike than we think so”. Could you elaborate on that? On the need to dissolve differences.

I'm delighted that you're picking on some of the more potent lines in the book. The acknowledgement for someone like him comes late in the book, but it is definitely something that we should all be taking into account. The fact remains that the pursuits, especially the amoral and reckless pursuit of wealth and fame and ambition, creates a kind of mentality, a kind of greedy, reckless, amoral mentality that whether it's secular or Hindu nationalist or liberal or pro [Donald] Trump or Boris Johnson causes enormous damage to other people and to society at large.

From the time Trump was elected, I was arguing that we should not see Trump as an aberration. This is a man very much a product of an era of a celebrity worship of fame, worship of wealth. He was essentially upheld as an embodiment of the successful American dream. Now we've all turned upon him and against him. But how can we forget the complicity of the media that is now criticising him, in building him up? A lot of us who have put ourselves in positions of so-called 'resistance' to these figures, whether Trump in America, Johnson in the UK or [Narendra] Modi in India, we also have to examine ourselves to what extent we were complicit in creating a culture that rewards people like these.

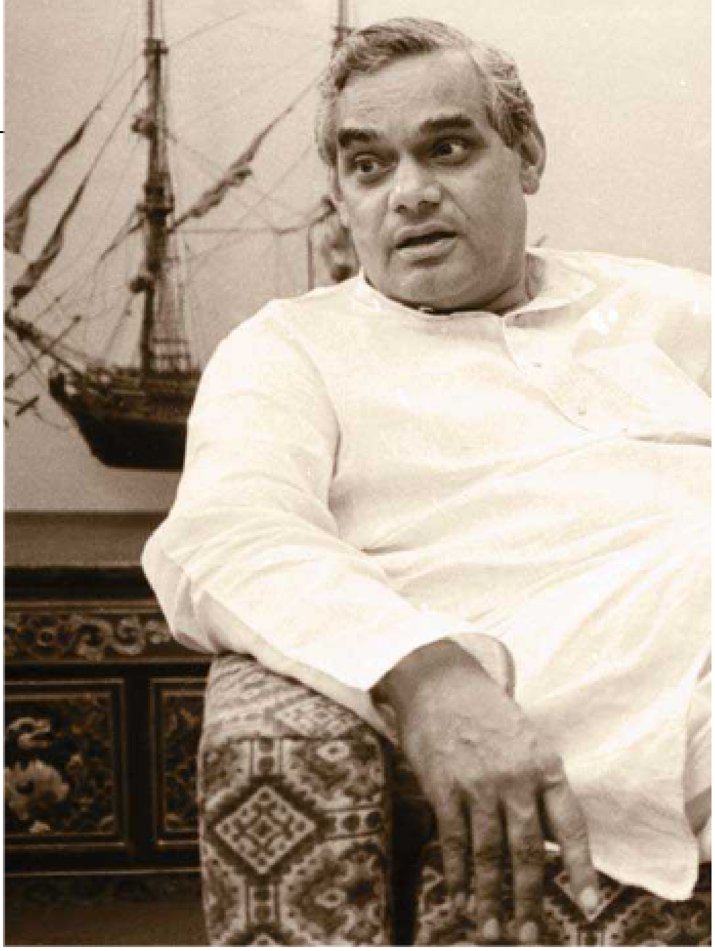
You write of the train station Deoli at night. How important was Ruskin Bond's *The Night Train at Deoli* to you?

This book is full of tributes to various writers, and careful readers will find them everywhere. Ruskin Bond, who I met very briefly once in Missouri, was someone I read as a child. And his evocations of railway journeys or railway stations stayed with me for a long time. So yes, Deoli is one way of paying tribute to him. There are others sprinkled throughout. *A Bend in the River* is a book that this novel is very explicitly in conversation with. But there are others too. There are references to Thomas Mann, there's [Alexander] Pushkin somewhere in there. Part of the fun of writing this book was to also deploy my reading. It's another way of showing that books are obviously drawn from life, but they're also drawn from other books. No writer should deny that, no writer should claim that it's all coming out of his own imagination. The fact is, we also are dependent on what we read. Those are the books that feed our imagination and expand it. ■

THE ENDEARING PARADOXES OF VAJPAYEE

Sagarika Ghose brings out the qualities and contradictions of India's most indulged prime minister in a new biography

By Mukund Padmanabhan

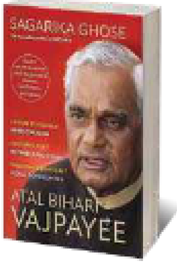


GETTY IMAGES

EVERYONE'S LIFE IS awash with contradictions, but there is a case for believing they were the very stuff that defined Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In her lively and absorbing biography of "India's most loved Prime Minister", Sagarika Ghose attempts to come to grips with these paradoxes, laying them out, trying to square them up, and leaving them unresolved when no explanations are possible—the last, quite correctly. It is biographical conceit to assume that something as complex as humans and their behaviour can be fully understood.

The book's cover flags three of these incongruities—Liberal Statesman/Hindutva Icon, Cultured Poet/Ruthless Politician, Passionate Democrat/Moral Compromiser—but one could add many more to the life of a man who was never easy to pin down. As the biographer of a person who died only four years ago, and as a journalist who covered the Vajpayee era, it was perhaps natural that Ghose would use the profusion of living witnesses to unravel this enigma of a man.

Biographers who prefer to know their subjects only from written record like to maintain that their accounts are more detached and ipso facto more objective. But Ghose's purpose is different. Hers is not to render Vajpayee in a chronological or accumulative manner (there is not much on his early years, for instance). Nor is it to write in an impassive non-opinionated way. She is critical when she feels the need to be. ("Appallingly, on Gujarat, Vajpayee the calculating politician prevailed over Vajpayee the constitutional moralist.") And there are words of praise for such traits as his "parliamentary spirit", his ability to forge personal relationships across political divides, and his engagement with Pakistan and the people of Kashmir.



ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE

Sagarika Ghose

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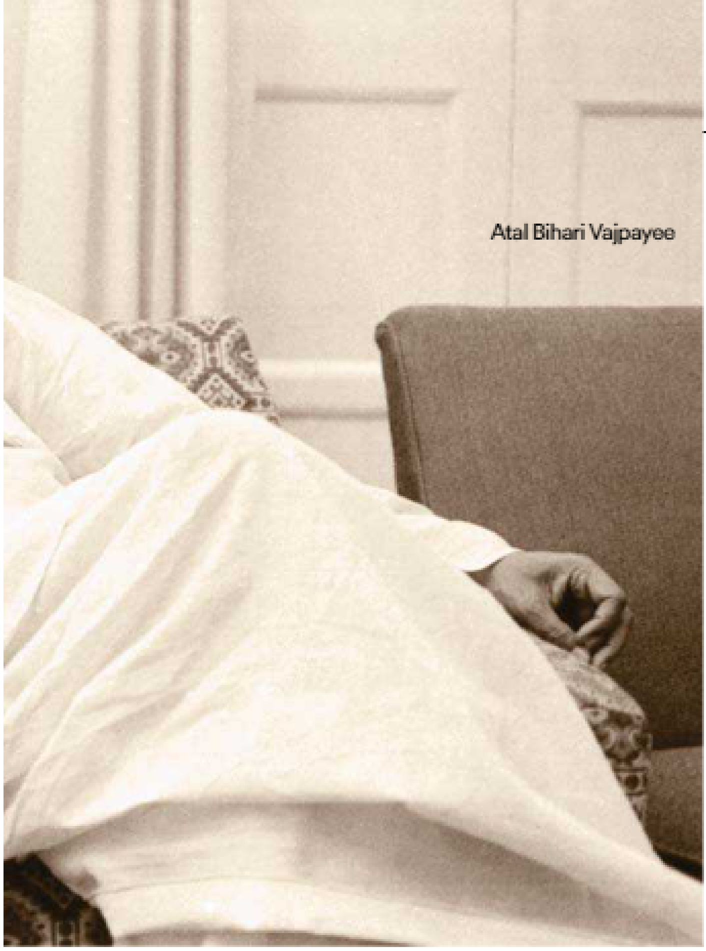
So, who was Vajpayee? Ghose doesn't pose the question explicitly. But it seems very much at the back of her mind as she grapples with the changeable ways of her "slippery hero", one day a "moderate" and the next day a "hardliner", endowed with a chameleon-like ability to meld with the shifting political mood. The picture that emerges is of a man who, for all his virtues, was a thoroughgoing politician, driven by a sharp ambition that lay concealed behind a cultivated mist of charismatic unworldliness. He was not above being ruthless to those he considered political rivals. Vajpayee played a pivotal role, for instance, in the downfall of Balraj Madhok (who went on to accuse him of an ugly conspiracy). And he cut down KN Govindacharya, who was blamed for describing Vajpayee as a *mukhauta* (mask), a charge the LK Advani camp follower and party ideologue denied, strongly and repeatedly.

Ghose's treatment of Vajpayee suggests he was anything but a *mukhauta*, at least not in way the expression was used to describe him. His moderate face was not something he donned for the sake of others, nor was it a part of a BJP ploy to appear middle of the road or politically temperate. The various faces he wore (or the masks he donned, if you must) were those *he* chose to. His discomfort with what Ghose calls the uber-Hindutva groups (such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal) was real. His disapproval of the shape the Ram Janmabhoomi movement was taking



Atal Bihari Vajpayee

and his belief that Narendra Modi must resign following the Gujarat riots weren't simulated either.

When he did fall in line with views he opposed, it was because he knew, as canny politicians do, that you only pick the battles you can win. As for his ability to change tack and obliquely defend what he once seemed to oppose, it was built around his proclivity to speak in generalities, with a strategic ambiguity that helped to at least partially obscure the contradictions.

The dizzying arc of his political life—which Ghose notes almost spanned the entire length of post-Independence India since he started contesting elections as early as 1955—is a story of many things. It is a tale of how Jana Sangh lived for decades in the shadow of Congress, particularly under the towering presence of Jawaharlal Nehru. The 1960s saw BJP entering into an electoral understanding with other parties in the cause of anti-Congressism, which developed into a broad and ideologically incohesive coalition against Indira Gandhi in the 1971 general election. This, in turn, prepared the ground for Jana Sangh to forsake its identity by merging into the Janata Party after the Emergency was lifted, only to reorganise as BJP in 1980.

It was during the mid-eighties that the Sangh stepped up the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign. It was spurred, among other things, by Rajiv Gandhi's capitulation on the Shah Bano controversy and his attempt to compensate politically for this by going along with the order to unlock the Babri Masjid for Hindu prayer. It was for this brief period, something like a decade, that Vajpayee's authority was diminished, with Advani (and others such as Murli Manohar Joshi) growing more assertive. But the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1991 doused some of the hot-headed fervour the movement had generated, and only a couple of years later, BJP stared at defeat in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere in the north.

In late 1995, Advani suddenly announced that a marginalised Vajpayee would lead BJP as its prime ministerial face in the next election. Ghose attributes this to Advani's "political astuteness" and a recognition of his own limitations. But it was also a brave decision, taken in the face of a disappointed RSS and other sections of the Parivar. It was also a tacit acknowledgment that, in the prevailing political circumstances, Vajpayee's ability to build coalitions and reconcile differences were needed once again. Ghose describes him as a "terrific listener". She also regards him as a liberal in the sense that he was open to forging close friendships with people he strongly disagreed with—a virtue that is not merely missing, but also frowned upon in these terrifyingly polarised times.

His first stint as Prime Minister lasted only an embarrassing 13 days, but Vajpayee was back, for one year the second time, going on to complete a full term after winning the post-Kargil election in 1999. Almost a full term is more accurate. Come 2004, Vajpayee was reluctantly persuaded by his inner circle to advance the election. It seemed logical given BJP's huge wins in the December 2003 State Assembly elections (the so-called semi-final) and an economy that was booming with double-digit growth. But an overconfident party failed, principally because it had lost the DMK (which had pulled out of the NDA well before the election) and did not anticipate the TDP's dismal performance in Andhra Pradesh. It also performed poorly in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, but these setbacks were partially offset with gains in other states.

It is here that Ghose begins her account, with the story of loss. It is not clear why she does so, but it is possible she believes that this was the most dramatic swing in Vajpayee's career. Written with a keenness to engage the reader, with generous sprinkles of anecdotes and political insight, the book paints a convincing portrait of a man—his virtues, his faults, the compulsions that moved him to act, and the constraints that stayed his hand. If the book leaves one feeling there is still more to the man, it is hardly the author's fault. Blame it on the conundrum called Vajpayee. ■

IN SAGARIKA GHOSE'S ACCOUNT, VAJPAYEE EMERGES AS A MAN WHO, FOR ALL HIS VIRTUES, WAS A THOROUGHGOING POLITICIAN, DRIVEN BY A SHARP AMBITION THAT LAY CONCEALED BEHIND A CAREFULLY CULTIVATED MIST OF CHARISMATIC UNWORLDLINESS

DAILY HEROES

Three documentaries—about pioneering women journalists, brothers who rescue birds, and the lookalikes of Bollywood stars—are getting international recognition

By Divya Unny

Writing with Fire

All That Breathes

ON A SCORCHING summer day in India, a resolute, saree-clad reporter walks into a village in the heartland of Uttar Pradesh. She's there to investigate the story of a damaged road that has disrupted the lives of those living in the vicinity. The scene is packed with villagers, media and the local mafia—all men, with some stake in the story. With a smartphone in one hand, and a pen in the other, Sunita fearlessly leans in. "You have no business here," she's told by a man who doesn't bother introducing himself. "You can say anything you like, as long as you say it to the camera," Sunita says firmly.

Urf

Sunita, a Dalit from Uttar Pradesh—is one among a group of women who over the last two decades or so—played a pioneering role in Indian journalism. *Khabar Lahariya*, one of India's only women-led media outlets, published in various rural dialects of Hindi, was making its transition into the digital world, when filmmakers Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh entered their lives. The above scene is from their documentary *Writing with Fire*, that's now scored a nomination for the 94th Academy Awards in the Best Documentary Feature category. *Writing with Fire*, which premiered in the World Cinema Documentary competition at the Sundance Film Festival, 2021 and won the Audience Award and Special Jury Award at the festival, is one of a handful of recent Indian documentaries that have been creating waves across borders. From *Writing with Fire* to Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes* that won the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance International Film Festival 2022, to Geetika Narang Abbasi's *Urf* that premiered at The International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR) and won accolades for its tribute to Indian cinema, each of these films bring us stories of ordinary people with extraordinary lives.

A group of women in UP reporting stories and defying hierarchies, two animal activist brothers creating a home for hundreds of injured kites in Delhi, three lookalikes of Bollywood superstars inventing their own stardom and fanbase—these docudramas tell of little-known heroes foregrounded against social change. "Rural Dalit women who are always so invisibilised, finding a way to express themselves through news-making, through an independent feminist lens, is a big deal. For years these women have been represented by the tyranny of a certain kind of narrative, and I felt that these women had rescued themselves from that narrative by telling their own story. They were mostly in media-dark villages where other journalists wouldn't travel, and these are also regions that are hugely divided by caste. In a world like that, giving them the power of pen and paper, to say that your perspective matters, your voice matters, has been huge," says Thomas for whom telling the story of the protagonists Meera, Sunita and Shyamkali became imperative because of their daily gumption and resilience.

Shaunak Sen chose to tell the story of brothers Mohammad Saud and Nadeem Shehzad, who have dedicated more than 20 years of their lives to kite rescue. *All that Breathes* is a unique and stark portrayal of man versus wild, and the kinship between human and non-human life in an increasingly hostile environment. Growing up in Delhi, the director was always witness

"THESE JOURNALISTS WORK MOSTLY IN MEDIA-DARK VILLAGES WHERE OTHER JOURNALISTS WOULDN'T TRAVEL, AND THESE ARE ALSO REGIONS THAT ARE HUGELY DIVIDED BY CASTE. IN A WORLD LIKE THAT, GIVING THEM THE POWER OF PEN AND PAPER, TO SAY THAT YOUR PERSPECTIVE MATTERS, YOUR VOICE MATTERS, HAS BEEN HUGE"

Rintu Thomas director, *Writing with Fire* to Delhi's haze, and he wanted to show the changing animal-human relationship in this context. "The brothers' selfless lives and what they do was the main bulwark of the film, but it is as much a story of the city itself. Animals are constantly adjusting and improvising in the city and nature is constantly evolving to the accelerated sense of things in the city. Non-human life isn't a passive bystander to this change. The themes of simultaneity and coexistence stare back at us blatantly, and that was an important aspect to show," says Sen who is still reeling from the recognition the film received at Sundance. *All that Breathes* in its storytelling and visualisation is an intriguing and moving film. The siblings, who rescue, heal, feed, and then free kites from their derelict basement, are a rare breed. The film glides through life in Delhi and highlights the stark contrasting rhythms of the humans and non-humans. The shot of a snail making its way through in the foreground, while people busily celebrate a festival by burning wood in the background underlines this. Sen, whose previous documentary *Cities of Sleep* (2015) was about sleeper communities in Delhi, recognises the melancholy of life in an Indian city that is rapidly changing. "This story was just waiting to be told, and we had to decide how. The film shows the inner lives of the brothers who have devoted their lives to a kind of monumental impossibility of a task, and yet they go through it with grace. Within that we used the vignettes of animal life in the city, to further the emotional graph, like two horses pulling a glowing carriage," Sen says.

Filmmaker Geetika Narang Abbasi, also based out of Delhi, captures a different kind of duality through the lens of superstar lookalikes in her film *Urf*. The novel subject—lookalikes or the Junior Artists—created a stir at IFFR where this culture of stardom is unheard of. *Urf* takes us into the worlds and the minds of Kishore Bhanushali aka Jr Dev Anand, Firoz Khan aka Jr Amitabh Bachchan, and Prashant Walde, aka Jr Shah Rukh Khan—actors who have spent their entire lives imitating Hindi cinema legends and now have their own cult following. "Assuming someone else's personality and making a career of it is unique in itself. This film is a human story of someone's passion, destiny playing the role in defining their identity, and also their pursuit for acting and creativity. These actors can't reach where the stars are, but for people who can't meet the superstars, meeting these actors becomes very satisfying. They were just happy to do that, and they don't judge their art or the path they have chosen to perform. That's the most inspiring part," says Abbasi. Kishore Bhanushali has spent more than 40 years of his life playing Dev Anand, a yesteryear star, but is now trying to discover his own voice. Who are they when they aren't in the skin of the superstar? The film explores this paradox with skill and sensitivity. "What they do gets them money and fame, but like any actor they have lives beyond that image. They have dealt with an identity crisis of sorts in their life. They live with that paradox, but aren't bitter about it. They draw purpose from it. For their friends and family, they are individuals beyond actors and when they are off screen that's all that matters," she adds.

For these films truth is stranger and perhaps even stronger than fiction. Each of them defines the intention of the filmmakers to inherently represent change—be it good or bad. Here are films of human triumph that move you and make you think, and it doesn't necessarily involve a monologue or a roaring soundtrack. The filmmakers also believe that this wave of documentary cinema in India, that is usually so driven by fiction, may actually be a steppingstone to more filmmakers moving towards telling stories that often go unsung. More than anything it has reignited hope and inspiration.

"Meera, [a leading *Khabar Lahariya* journalist] travelled with us to Amsterdam and she was mobbed every time people would see her. When you do this kind of heavy lifting every day—you're not necessarily celebrated—but when your life is inspiring a complete stranger, it has a kind of energy to it. She is a mother of two, who has led this change. Anyone who has been told their lives don't matter or they don't belong, thinks, 'If Meera can do it, why can't I?' That's the power of what they do, and the power of cinema," says Thomas. ■

"THIS STORY WAS JUST WAITING TO BE TOLD, AND WE HAD TO DECIDE HOW. THE FILM SHOWS THE INNER LIVES OF THE BROTHERS WHO HAVE DEVOTED THEIR LIVES TO A KIND OF MONUMENTAL IMPOSSIBILITY OF A TASK, AND YET THEY GO THROUGH IT WITH GRACE"

Shaunak Sen director, *All that Breathes*

"THESE ACTORS CAN'T REACH WHERE THE STARS ARE, BUT FOR PEOPLE WHO CAN'T MEET THE SUPERSTARS, MEETING THESE ACTORS BECOMES VERY SATISFYING. THEY WERE JUST HAPPY TO DO THAT, AND THEY DON'T JUDGE THEIR ART OR THE PATH THEY HAVE CHOSEN TO PERFORM"

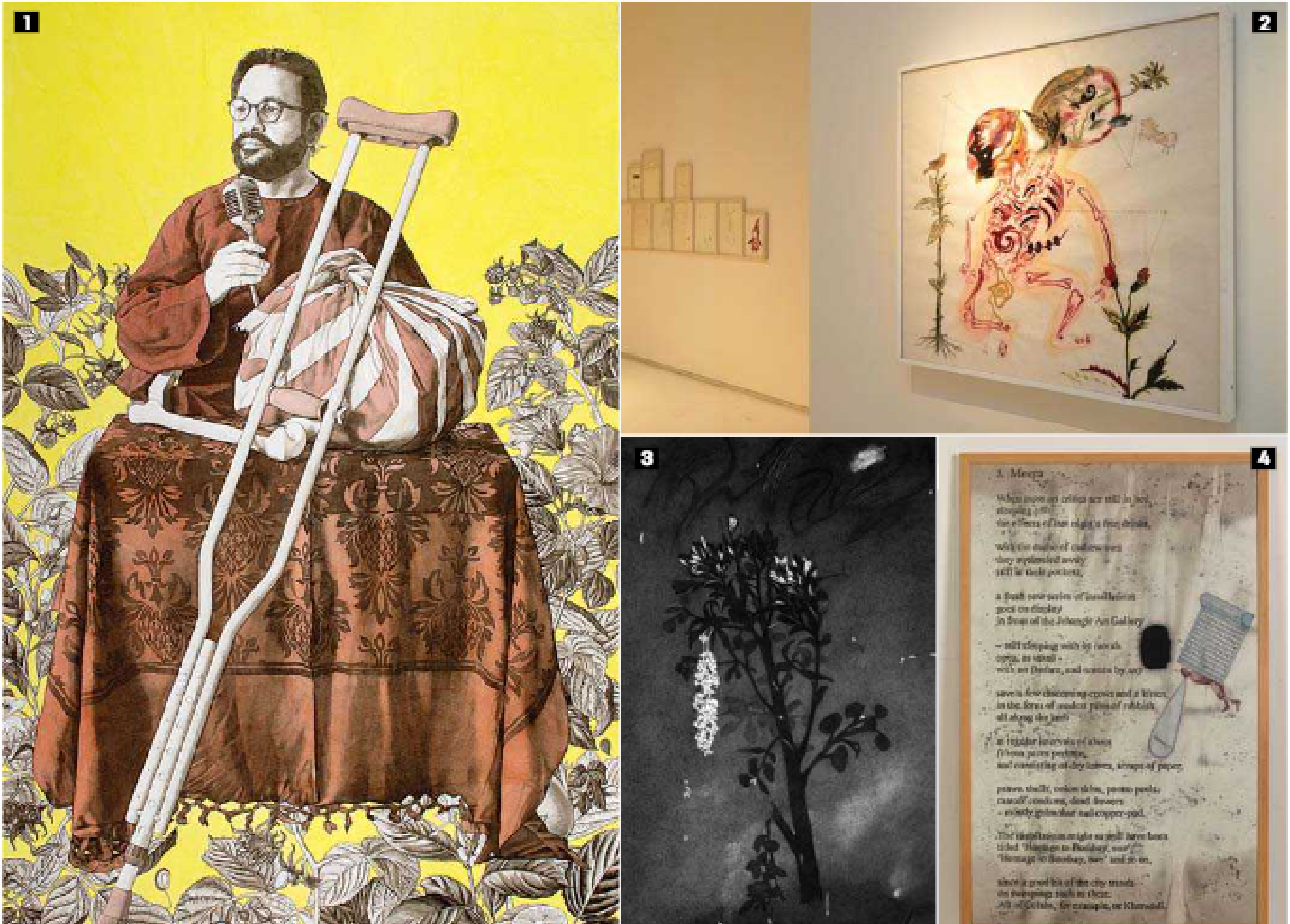
Geetika Narang Abbasi director, *Urf*

WRITING AND SEEING

PAPER AS MEDIUM, MESSAGE AND MUSE

By Shaikh Ayaz

THERE'S SOMETHING primal about paper. For artists, the humble sketchpad is both a starting point for new creative journeys as well as a material with endless possibilities. Inexpensive and flexible, it is also the most easily available medium. But in today's digitalised world, when someone even as old-school as David Hockney has moved to tablet doodling, paper can seem a bit passé. Kolkata-based Emami Art gallery aims to counter that narrative. Curated by Ushmita Sahu, *The Politics of Paper* is an alchemic enquiry into the nature of this most conventional of artistic mediums on which artists over centuries have left their mark. The show includes works by Anju and Atul Dodiya, NS Harsha, Mithu Sen, Jagannath Panda, Prasanta Sahu, TV Santhosh, Jayashree Chakravarty and Adip Dutta. Though wide-ranging in their preoccupations and practice, this heterogeneous group has a common affection for paper. "The material is the mainstay of our concept for *The Politics of Paper*," stresses Ushmita. "Due to its egalitarian ethos, paper automatically releases the artists from trying to fit into a given subject. We have invited only those names who have had a genuinely long-term engagement with the medium. In many cases, the language of these artists has become iconic, inspiring the next generation. For example, Atul, Anju, Santhosh or even Mithu Sen, they all started exploring watercolour on paper decades ago, yet their approaches and aesthetics cannot be more different."



1. *Hello...Am I Loud Enough...?* by TV Santhosh; 2. *Conjoined Twins* by Mithu Sen; 3. An untitled work by Chandra Bhattacharjee; 4. *Meera – 3* by Atul Dodiya

Courtesy EMAMI ART AND THE ARTISTS

Showing in Kolkata for the first time, Atul Dodiya's Kala Ghoda poem works from 2017, sets the tone for this group exhibition. Based on Arun Kolatkar's poems, these large-scale watercolours conjoin the pleasures of the written word with the romance of old Bombay. This series of paintings were done during Mumbai's monsoon to keep the paper moist so that Atul could manipulate the spread of watercolour. Otherwise known for his pop culture-infused spectacles that evoke Bollywood and European art in equal measure, Atul Dodiya has continued to maintain an almost parallel practice that involves the use of paper over the decades. Paper has given successful artists like him "freedom from the demands of the market," Ushmita notes. More than Atul, his wife Anju Dodiya can perhaps claim a greater fidelity to the medium. Since the beginning of her career, the Mumbai-based Anju has relied on the spontaneity of paper to explore her self-image. The autobiographical *The Enfolding*, features an Anju-like figure holding a pencil in her hand as she gets engulfed by blank pages. Anju's concept note reads, "Paper is that terrible white that remains the joy and terror of my creative life. It envelopes, invites, chokes, frees, and allows flight."

A similar existential gloom embodies Chandra Bhattacharjee's monochromatic charcoal drawings of flowering trees, shooting stars and fireflies hinting at the mysterious and secretive self that resides in every human being. For Bhattacharjee, paper might be an ordinary material designed for everyday use, but it retains power to awaken a "new life and meaning when an artist explores it." Ushmita observes, "There's a literary quality to his art. It's like being inside an emotionally moving scene of a dark forest full of nocturnal sounds. His art makes you think about nature." On the other hand, NS Harsha's 40-feet wide wall installation *Reclaiming the Inner Space* uses found cardboard cartons to caution against the growing consumerist menace.

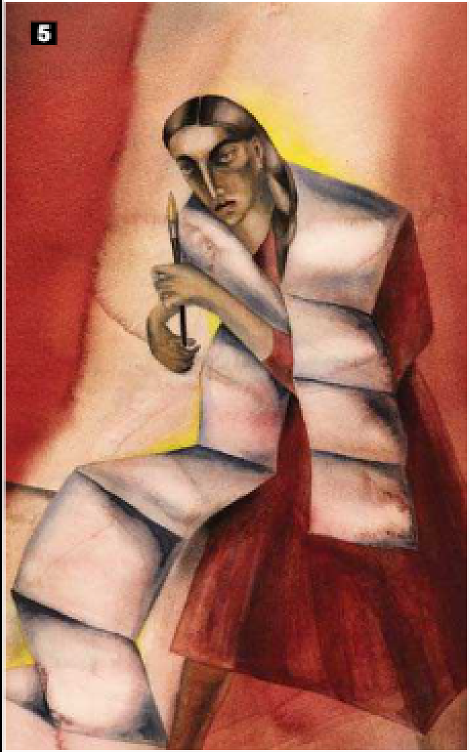
Currently living and working from West Bengal, both Adip Dutta and Prasanta Sahu hold teaching jobs in art colleges in Kolkata and Santiniketan respectively. Born in Balasore, Odisha, Prasanta Sahu discovered the charms of paper by accident. He used to write and paint in scrapbooks and did not pursue it seriously at first. "I never exhibited them though they contained beautiful drawings. One day, I happened to revisit one of my diaries and was surprised to find that even with age they looked good. I said to myself, 'What if I do this on paper instead of the scrapbook?' That's how my journey with paper began," says Sahu, over a phone conversation from Visva-Bharati University where he works as an associate professor in the fine arts department. He says he doesn't fear paper but prefers it to canvas because, "It's a medium which allows you to be subtle as opposed to a canvas where you are tempted to pour layers and layers of colour." For him, drawing on paper is one of the fundamental things he loves about art. An electrical engineer by training, Sahu says, laughing, "I think it won't be wrong to say that I could pass in engineering in the first place thanks to my drawing skills. I spent four years making technical drawings of alternators and generators and all kinds of analytical studies as a student. I used to enjoy my playful interaction with paper and sketching. And I still do."

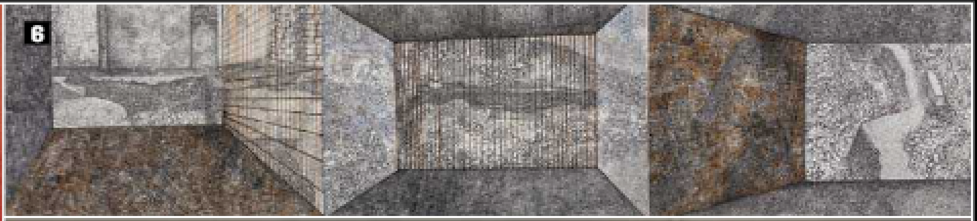
> "DUE TO ITS EGALITARIAN ETHOS, PAPER AUTOMATICALLY RELEASES THE ARTISTS FROM TRYING TO FIT INTO A GIVEN SUBJECT. WE HAVE INVITED ONLY THOSE NAMES WHO HAVE HAD A GENUINELY LONG-TERM ENGAGEMENT WITH THE MEDIUM"
>
> **Ushmita Sahu**, curator

The 52-year-old Sahu's *Harvesting - The Untold Story: A Conversation with the Land* is one of the most politically charged installations in *The Politics of Paper*. Composed of recycled waste including tissue paper cast from plaster moulds sourced directly from vegetables, it speaks of his commitment to keep art as real as possible. "As an artist, I want to constantly introduce newer windows to look at a particular issue, in this case the farmers with small land holdings and the extremely marginalised and disadvantaged tribals," he says.

Likewise, Adip Dutta's art is a response to his immediate surroundings. Having a day job at the Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata requires him to traverse the city, past chaotic streets, noisy hawkers, industrial units, shantytowns and what he calls "soft architecture". His primary interest lies in underlining the contradictions between the hustle and bustle of the urban spaces he encounters every day and their desolate presence—or absence as it were—when he commits them to paper. "There's a dichotomy, in the sense that I am indicating the source and then negating it in order to build an artistic ambivalence," says the 51-year-old Kolkata native. Paper encourages Dutta to work slowly and meticulously, with fine lines and dots that trail off into a "ball of energy". Describing paper as his "main medium," he says, "I select paper for its fragility after which I load it with marks. That is how the process is set into motion." Dutta believes that the most intriguing aspect of paper remains its strong association with both writing and drawing. Take Egyptian hieroglyphic systems, for example, which combine elements of writing and visuals and can be read as either—or neither. Dutta explains, "Sometimes, as in the case of Rabindranath Tagore, writing becomes an extension of drawing and vice versa. Paper is somewhere in between. It's a space for both and it helps you to switch seamlessly from one to the other."

For curator Ushmita Sahu, paper is both her past and present. As a young student pursuing art in Delhi and later





5. ***The Enfolding*** **by Anju Dodiya; 6.** ***Unidentified Sights*** **by Adip Dutta;**
7. ***Harvesting - The Untold Story. A Conversation with the Land*** **by Prasanta Sahu**

at Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan through the 1990s, paper was her favourite. The show is her ode to paperdom and she talks excitedly about it. "Paper is so intimate," she remarks. "It allows for the immediacy of mark-making and it also encourages the acceptance of 'mistakes'. It is fragile and delicate but can last for eons. It has been woven into the very fabric of human history and has proven itself to be an extremely versatile artistic vehicle." Despite technological advances of the 21st century, paper has remained an elemental presence in the lives of Ushmita and her generation. "Paper makes you feel that you know it so well. We grew up writing and scribbling on paper. We studied in it and read from it, by way of books and newsprint. I remember, as a kid, opening a new book and smelling it. The scent of fresh paper is ingrained in my psyche," she says.

PAPER IS BAD for the environment but good for art, it seems. From artists and designers down to curious children, it services all creative souls as the de facto art tool. What's more, after the lockdown there has been a sudden resurgence of interest in pulp. Ushmita admits that the idea for *The Politics of Paper* came to her after the lockdown of 2020-21. She noticed that homebound artists with no access to art materials had started turning to paper. Many were making their own sheets from recycled waste. "Around the same time, I was also reading about Benode Behari Mukherjee and the Santiniketan masters and their intimate engagement with tempera and watercolour on paper. Historically, the Santiniketan masters, barring Ramkinkar Baij, did not work in oil. There was also the influence of Bengal School with a certain artistic language and medium as political intervention. All these events became a catalyst of trying to look at the paper as much more than just a material."

In tracing paper's overall evolution in the Indian context, Ushmita's encyclopaedic research yielded many personal discoveries about the various roles it has played in folk traditions, printmaking and miniatures. She also found some intriguing links between paper and nationalism during the 20th century's Bengal School movement. She explains, "The ecosystem of Indian art has its independent logic and the use of paper has followed a distinct trajectory of its own. It starts with its introduction in the 12th century in India. The illustrations on paper manuscripts replaced the earlier palm leaf paintings and these developed into the spectacular miniature painting schools with illustrated manuscripts, albums, folios and portraits. By the 19th century Bazaar schools of printmaking were well established and these looked at folk traditions, local socio-political and the European influence of the times to create an indigenous, vernacular language producing illustrations, matchbox covers, calendars etc." Lastly, there's paper's inherent connection with incendiary acts. As she points out, "One may think of protest posters and pamphlets distributed or pasted on walls in the cover of the night. It is also linked to the history of cinema and how dreams have been disseminated from the dream factories to the rural hinterland. Then there is obviously the print medium of newspapers and magazines and its massive history." Considering the legacy of paper, going 'paperless' seems a relatively impoverished future. ■

The Politics of Paper *runs at the Emami Art gallery, Kolkata, till March 29*

STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI

EKTA KAPOOR
ALIA BHATT
MITA VASHISHT

Dysfunctionally Functional

Every generation has its own wars to fight, Ekta Kapoor told me recently in an interview. What seems progressive in one era may well seem retrograde in another. What seems bold can look exploitative, and what seems inclusive can be patronising. Popular entertainment does a lot to change social and cultural mores. When she made the *saas-bahu* serials in 2000, she says women were finding their voice in their homes, in domestic decisions. So, whether it was Ba, the mother-in-law, rediscovering her identity when she was older, or whether it was marital rape, she says she fought battles that don't look like battles any more. So, if *Udaan* and *Kalyug* of the late 1980s and early 1990s normalised the working woman, her soaps made us enter the world of the homemaker, understand her frustrations and her fantasies, which has led us to the point of the wildly popular *Anupamaa* (Star Plus) of the 2020s who can have both a happy domestic life as well as a successful business. Soaps and movies have done much to change the image of happy and 'normal' families as well. As Ekta said to me: "We protect our children and try to give them this perfect upbringing, protected from all harsh realities, but is the world normal? They've been told fairy tales, and then life happens. That's why when I see kids from harder, tougher backgrounds, they seem much more able than kids from pampered, conventional backgrounds who've never seen life for what it is." Of her own and her brother's decision to have children via surrogacy, she says it is as much about children learning from their parents as the parents growing and evolving with their children after a certain point. "We didn't lead the conventional life, but we are the most dysfunctional functional family there is," she says laughingly of her own three-generational family.

Gangu *Bhai*

Alia Bhatt is an artistic adventurer, and that's great for this generation of filmmakers who need an able collaborator to tell different, more realistic stories. But something seems so terribly wrong to me about her portrayal of Gangubai Kathiawadi. At first, I was tempted to compare it with her mother Soni Razdan's depiction of a prostitute in Shyam Benegal's *Mandi* (1983). You can see the ease with which the Guildhall School of Music and Drama-trained actor performs as one of the prostitutes in Shabana Azmi's character Rukmini Bai's brothel populated by practically every notable indie film actress of the time—from Smita Patil to Neena Gupta, from Ila Arun to Anita Kanwar. Make no mistake, Alia is confident as Gangubai, unafraid to look ugly on occasion, and throwing herself fully into the art. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the director, has even praised her performance which, he says, transcends the upper class she comes from. Regardless of the fact that acting is all about transcending one's limitations, what strikes one as odd about the performance is the physicality, which is more akin to the swagger of a male gangster, *bhai* rather than *bai*. There is no guile and there are no wiles there, just an aggressive abandon in the walk which comes from not being comfortable in a sari. The life one lives, the way one behaves and the dress one chooses affect one's art. Then one has to spend a fair amount of time acclimatising to one's movie garments. In the prep for *A Suitable Boy* (2020), for instance, the male actors got high-waisted pants to wear a month before the shoot started so they could be comfortable in the environment of the 1950s. Otherwise, the film costume will look like borrowed clothes. And the persona will look as if it has been pinched from someone.

Scene That

There's another Gangubai in the making. Ravi Jadhav, who directed the effective *Nude* (2018) in Marathi, is creating *Chidiya Udd* for MX Player. Based on a novel, the series focuses on a young woman who runs away from Rajasthan to join Gangubai in Mumbai. Gangubai is played by the remarkable Mita Vashisht as a Bengali, Reshambai, with *alta* on her fingertips and grace in her mien. May the best Gangubai win. ■

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